

2nd Sunday of Easter
Sermon 4.12.26

John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear..., Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. (340)

I've always found it odd. I mean not always. It's not like I've been thinking about this story since birth. I've only been thinking about it since ordination, about twenty-five years ago. Prior to that, my familiarity with Bible stories is about what you'd expect for an American Protestant Mainliner. Adam and Eve. Noah's Ark. Ten Commandments, which I knew were ten in number but probably not much past that.

As for this story, it *should* be familiar if you're a certain type of church-goer. After all, we hear it every year. And not just one version of this encounter, but this version, John's version, which is the only gospel narrative to include such an encounter. Of all the four gospels we have, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, this encounter between the Risen Christ and the disciples locked away in fear, locked away in that upper room where so much had

happened in the last ten days, or near-upon where so much had happened in the last ten days: this is only in John.

And as for them, so for us: so much has happened in these last ten days. One last supper. An arrest. A trial. “Were you there when they crucified my Lord...?”

There are several stories that show up in all four gospels, and many of these we hear one version of which every year—Jesus’ baptism, his being tested in the wilderness, his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. But this is one of only two that we hear every year, chapter and verse. So it’s possible we know it, and perhaps know it only too well.

It’s also possible we don’t because, the thing is, we always and only ever hear it on the second Sunday of Easter, which is one of those Sundays for but a certain sort of church-goer. The really dedicated ones. Most are still sleeping off Easter. Even the pastor often takes this Sunday off. Leave the preaching to the intern. No one’s gonna be here anyway.

I mean, no one but the likes of us.

And so here we are, in this familiar room, near which we’d have entered in real time with Jesus on Palm Sunday when he entered Jerusalem and when, liturgically, we follow him in time, day by day, our two weeks to this moment matching his two weeks to this moment, when on the evening of the first day and then a week later on the evening again, differing only in that we’re gathering in the morning on the week later, after that first day.

The fear that gripped the tightly gathered disciples makes story-sense. The city had exploded in population and eventually in unrest. The Passover festival had it so there were people from all over the Judean world there, which had it so the Roman presence policing the streets was equal in measure. Amidst this teeming scene, the entry of Jesus, often described in church as “triumphal,” was likely one of those things easy not to notice. Important to those for whom it was important, and immersive for those there, this act of street-theater staged as if to mock imperial power, it was also meager given its larger context.

That said, Jesus would attract attention as the week went on. Spending days in the Temple, he provoked encounters with the religious authorities—Sadducees, scribes. Spending nights on the Mount of Olives outside the city, where an invading army might gather to get a high view of the city, he attracted the attention of imperial

authorities-Herodians, eventually a detachment of the imperial guard. By week's end, of course, the mounting tension had turned terrifyingly violent, Jesus joined up as one more crucified peasant mounted on a cross outside the city wall, casting a shadow of terror on any who came close or who had been close.

Like the disciples.

Now locked away in fear.

It makes story-sense. Violence unleashed has a way of spreading. Catchy like a fire that has jumped its boundary and now finds fuel everywhere.

It also makes sense for those in the community for whom this gospel was likely written. The Johannine community, from which and for which this gospel narrative was written, was made up of people who'd been driven from their homes and villages, their synagogues and indeed the land, driven north, exiled and now tightly-knit. These were people who'd have real reason to fear, and so imagining the disciples as sharing in that fear might have been important, even generative, an *esprit de corps*.

Which would also have made Jesus' words of greeting all the more jarring and indeed powerful in their way. "Peace be with you." Three days earlier unjustly crucified, four days earlier unjustly accused and farcically tried and then facilely sentenced, five days earlier betrayed, he was now back and what he had first to say is heard as all the more powerful when it's considered against what he *might* have said but didn't.

Movie-goers these days might remember other powerful, portentous returns. In *The Shining*, Stephen King's horror novel turned into Stanley Kubrick's horror movie starring (terrifying) Jack Nicholson, his character's madness haunts the Overlook Hotel and his violence stalks poor Shelly Duvall. He chops with an ax through the door whose locks she had hoped would hold. "I'm back," he says with, apparently, not peace in mind. It's been very meme-ified in this ironical age of social media.

In reference to this, I imagine, the Terminator would ten years later promise in a most menacing fashion, "I'll be back," and then in the sequel, a still cheesier affair, announced himself returned and, at the moment, half on fire, "I'm back," which again doesn't seem to have brought much comfort (based on asking a couple of people because I'm not about to watch those movie because I am a mortal creature and I only have so much time.)

Surely this isn't but a recent phenomenon. Surely, there are loftier moments in culture, literature, and myth when someone returns to the world from a higher plane of existence and that return, made possible by power beyond typical power, only brings unending menace and spectacular violence. Revenge for the one unjustly killed. Vengeance for the ones made to fear.

Not so here.

Not so here.

"Peace be with you."

And he didn't need an ax to make it through the door, though the locks didn't hold, as neither the tomb would. Here among them, though dead also alive, though killed—shamefully, painfully, excruciatingly killed—now alive, wounded mortally yet somehow alive (still? again?): "Peace be with you."

And I've always found it odd, or at least for the twenty-five years I've spent reflecting on this I've found it odd, what Thomas wanted to see, what Thomas seemed not to believe. The wounds. The fact that the risen one had truly suffered wounds, wounds of shame, wounds of a criminal or of the poor or of an alien outsider, the sort of wounds only the least fortunate in the world would ever be made to suffer.

He could have found the resurrection itself the incredible thing. He could have been incredulous at the resurrection itself, the fact that someone whom they all knew was dead, someone whom they'd all seen die, was now out and about, was now (still? again?) alive. But he didn't say, "Until I see him out and about with my own eyes, until I see him passing through locked doors like they were nothing and speaking to us and breathing on us with my own senses, then I will not believe, I will not trust this testimony as true, I won't trust to such a degree that it changes how I live." Instead he said, "Until I put my fingers in his nail marks and my hand in his sliced open side, I will not believe, I will not trust."

It has long struck me that Thomas wasn't incredulous at the resurrection, he was incredulous at the resurrection of the crucified one. It's not that he didn't believe God would or could resurrect renewed life from the dead, it's that he didn't believe God would or could do this first and foremost for a crucified one.

But once you trust that this is the case (incredibly, unbelievably, impossibly), you can also trust that even the likes of you might not be beyond God's grace to save, to raise.

And once you trust that, though the world might do its worst to you, and that you might yet be worthy of God's grace, God's favor, then you've got the sort of courage more truly to live. To be yourself, to live more by vulnerable love than by gathering power, to spend your energy serving that all might rise rather than spending your energy in securing your own dominance: this is what it means to trust that God would go to the pained bother of resurrecting the crucified one, resurrecting any whom the world would crush. Indeed, this is what it means to trust that God would go to the pained bother of *becoming* the crucified one, becoming one of the many whom the world world crush.

I was given God when I was young. Though it wasn't until ordination that I knew much of anything about the Bible, or about theology proper or many of the church's long history and varied traditions, I was given God young. My family went to church. Every Sunday, just down the road, a United Church of Christ whose hilltop steeple was practically visible from my house—but for the trees. New England and its trees.

When I was in high school, a boarding school where I was a day student, I attracted the attention of people who were mean, boys who were mean. This isn't unusual: this is high school. It also wasn't unusual at this particular high school where a lot of girls suffered mean attention. But it affected me in ways it didn't seem to affect other girls, or at least not as far as I could tell. There wasn't much solidarity there, as far as I could tell.

One of the boys who'd been relentless about me, a year older, also a day student, found himself alone with me once in the library, where the day students were housed and but barely tolerated. I cornered him. "What is your problem with me?" I asked him—and as I remember he struggled to explain himself, came up with a couple bits of evidence of why I deserved his heaping scorn, stupid things for him to hold so devotedly in mind. Also as I remember it, he went away from that encounter embarrassed, one of those times when the accuser and not the accused was the one brought to shame.

A few years ago, I heard his name again, one I'll probably always remember. A long-retired colleague of Jesse had died, an old man who'd had a long and lovely life, and an active member of one of our Berkshire Association churches. In the funeral announcement in the *Eagle*, this boy-now-man's name was listed among the survivors of the deceased. He was the son-in-law. It had me declare I wouldn't be going to the funeral, but then a few days later deciding I would.

At the receiving line, which he watched in my slow and long approach, each of us tall so able to see one another across the crowded room, he couldn't quite place me. "I'm Liz Goodman now," I said. "But I was Liz Rogers when we knew each other." ("I'm *ba-ack*.") He could only look at Jesse after that. "I wasn't a very nice person when I knew Liz," he said, following which we kept it brief. Jess and I expressed our condolences, and then we had a couple egg salad sandwiches that the church ladies had prepared.

I've often wondered why I didn't believe it when all those people in high school tried to tell me who I was in terms far from fond—which happens wherever children and young people gather. We think childhood is idyllic, all felted wool and fairies. It can also be nakedly cruel. Children are people after all, and playgrounds are but iterations of the whole world, just scaled down and painted in primary colors. Today, when I wonder why, I suppose it's because Thomas shows what it is to believe in the crucified and risen Lord, that what we're accused of is not what we are, that what the world heaps on us is not what we deserve. Not that I knew Thomas back in the day. But I did know Jesus. I did know God.

Of course, there are sufferings in this world that far outpace the loneliness of the prep school student. The good news is that even unto the deepest depths of human torment—even those deepest depths of human-*made* torment—the God of all creation plumbs, raises up, and gathers into redeeming light and gracious love.

But if all that sounds like church jargon and propaganda, just go with Thomas on this one, insist on seeing those wounds, the wounds of the beloved one, which reveal a God whose way is utterly different from the ways of the world, whose estimation of worth and deservedness bursts the bounds of this world, the circular logic of worldly desserts, stifling and zero-sum.

Actually, you might already be going with Thomas on this one. Whenever some alien enemy is presented as deserving what hell the world might reign down on them, and you remain unconvinced, you might already be with Thomas on the question. Truly, whenever our Secretary of War, for example, insists that God's glory comes in cluster bombs and airborne munitions, and that God's judgment is to be found in firebombed schools and decapitated governments, oppressive and unjust though these might also be, and you say to yourself, "I don't think so," then Thomas has already brought his seeing to your sight. Indeed, if you're skeptical of "Holy War," and deeply doubt the power of spectacular

violence to save us from what we fear, then the crucified Lord has passed through your locked door as well.

And this room: it's getting crowded.

But we can always fit more.

Thanks be to God.