
The Real Work

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Bill Harkins
Easter 2 – Year B

In the name of the God of Creation who loves us all, Amen.

In the Gospel lesson for today we find the disciples behind locked doors, hiding together in fear in the upper room. No doubt the words of the women at the tomb were ringing in their ears, only worsening their isolation and fear: “They have taken away our Lord and we do not know where they have taken him.” Suddenly Jesus appears, and speaks those remarkable words; “Peace be with you”. And he breathes upon them and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” And in John’s version of the story Jesus says, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” It may be that forgiveness is at the heart of today’s Gospel story, and this includes both forgiving others, and ourselves. These are parables of grace, and resurrection.

But where was Thomas? Perhaps he needed to be alone. He needed time to think, to question, to ponder the events swirling around him. Maybe he went to that place we all may go, in the midst of deep grief and confusion, where we believe that no one can reach us, even if it is not true. It’s easy to be drawn to Thomas because he seems so human. After all, it was Thomas who asked Jesus how they could know the way. Jesus replied “I am the way, the truth, and the life”. But Thomas needed proof. He was perhaps among the first purveyors of the scientific method. His hypothesis in this instance was that unless he saw “the marks of the nails in Jesus’ hands and unless he put his hand in Jesus’ side, he would not believe.” The elegant beauty of the scientific method is that it allows us to test one hypothesis against others. And this is how we learn. Jesus understood this, and was not critical of Thomas. Rather, he affirmed Thomas in his doubting, and helped him move beyond it to faith. Martin Luther King, who died 50 years ago this month, said that “Faith is taking the first step even when you don’t see the whole staircase.”

It’s easy to have empathy for Thomas because we may recall times in our lives when we felt the same way; times when it seemed that we wandered lost, and scared, and we questioned our faith. The world of Jesus’ followers had been turned upside down and was in utter chaos. And yet, Thomas possessed two great virtues: he absolutely refused to say that he understood what he did not understand, or that he believed what he did not believe. There was an uncompromising honesty about him. He refused to respond to the anxiety of his own doubts by pretending they did not exist. Thomas, like the other disciples, was lost. And he had the courage to name his disorientation. As Wendell Berry said so well, “It may be that when we no longer know what to do we have come our real work, and that when we no longer know which way to go we have come to our real journey. The mind that is not baffled is not employed. The impeded stream is the one that sings.”

In today’s Gospel Jesus is reminding Thomas, and by extension all of us, that it is often relationship that heals us when we no longer know what to do or where to go. Relationship is where the real work begins. Jesus reaches out to Thomas in his isolation and his questions. It is not doubt that is the enemy. Rather, it is responding to it by cutting ourselves off from others that is most risky. And we are most likely to do this when, like the disciples, we are scared, sad, angry, and lost, and we hide ourselves behind closed doors. Often, what locks us in are our fears, insecurities, illnesses, compulsions or addictions, past hurts we have experienced and hold inside, and hurts we have caused. The social scientist Brene’ Brown has said that faith communities, in order to be safe containers for beloved community, must be “shame free.” They must create safe spaces for honest, authentic transparency in relation to those things that would keep us in the bondage of

disconnection. In striving towards hospitality, excellence, and grace we seek to create that safe space here at the Cathedral, each connection born of relationships. Jesus gives us an alternative to being cut off from ourselves, and others, and from God.

The grace and forgiveness in today's Gospel may assist us when we have had to piece our lives back together after they have been turned upside down, and our doubts prevail. And we have similar examples. The story is told that the Great Window at Westminster Cathedral was destroyed during WWII. After the war, pieces of glass of all shapes, sizes and colors were collected from the dust and rubble, and lovingly fixed together and placed in the frame of the old west window, bringing the Cathedral to life again. Careful examination of the window would reveal the faces of angels, disciples and kings, all jumbled up with pieces of colored glass; small fragments of writing in Latin, next to drawings on glass of clothes, hands and feet. Bit by bit the window space was filled in with old glass until the most amazing window was completed, a feast for the eyes, and a thing of beauty. It didn't tell stories from the Bible exactly as it had originally, but told a different story. This story was of good overcoming evil, of sadness turning into great joy, of conflict replaced by forgiveness and peace. It put the words of Jesus into action by showing what could be done when people worked together to do good things. Today's Gospel is just like this, and our lives can be like this too. Thomas understood this well.

Well, some time ago I attended the "birthday" of a friend who was celebrating his ninth year of sobriety. I first met him in 1978 when we began working together as counselors on the adolescent psychiatric unit at Peachford Hospital. Just out of college, a little scared and uncertain what to do next, I learned so much from my colleagues, and from the patients and families with whom we worked over the next two years. My life and that of my friend took different paths, but we kept in touch. I knew he had struggled with alcohol, but I did not realize the depth of his addiction. And so on a cold and rainy night some 35 years after we met, I drove up to Cherokee County as he picked up his 9-year chip. I walked into a room filled to capacity—maybe 70-80 souls in recovery. That night I heard the testimonies of those who knew my friend, and stories of life—his and theirs—before and after sobriety. I was moved by their openness, shared vulnerability, and honesty. I noted the utter lack of shame in that safe space. I heard my friend say how drinking almost killed him, and how he had said to those gathered in that very room, some nine years earlier, "I am lost. Tell me what to do, and if you tell me, I will do it." And then, through tears of one who has come back from the edge of the abyss, "You saved my life, you know... I asked, and you gave, and you told me to work each step, and that you would be there with me each step of the way. And you were. I was among the living dead, and I slowly came back to life. I am here tonight, standing up here talking to you, because you people saved my life." As I listened, a phrase came to mind from St. Augustine: "In the midst of life we are in death, and in Christ, in the midst of death we may find life." Here was a perfect example of a man whose life had in many ways ended... who was no longer fully alive, and who had come back to life. And so it was that those gathered that night were practicing resurrection; Thomas' story of grace and forgiveness, and ours.

And so you see, dear ones, those souls had chosen not to remain trapped and hidden behind the locked doors of their addictions—a living death cut off from relationship, but rather to be in community, out in the open. In so doing, they had to face with brutal honesty—a searching, fearless, and unrelenting moral inventory— as they say in the recovery community, the truth of what had kept them imprisoned. I found myself inspired by this connection of relationships, and I understood my friend better too. And, I understood the power of the Paschal Mystery of Easter a bit more clearly: that in the phrase "one day at a time" we see the truth of that new life. It was as if we placed our hands in the wounded brokenness of my friend's soul, and we believed. In Christ, darkness and death has been overcome—is overcome—one day, one moment at a time, here and now. Jesus wanted the disciples to see his wounds so that they could understand the resurrection hope those scars represented. The Easter miracle of this Gospel passage is that Jesus comes again and again to these confused, frightened disciples, and offers himself. And like Thomas and his brothers we are called to move through times of doubt to moments of grace. To move, that is from Good Friday losses to Holy Saturday ambiguity, and on to Easter. To give of ourselves, our stories of doubt, grace, and forgiveness, we must know ourselves—that's the fearless moral inventory. "Practice Resurrection," the wonderful writer Wendell Berry says to us, and every time we choose to do this, the grace-filled Easter story continues. When I got home that night, I sent my old friend a message thanking him for the gift of his story, and for inviting me into that sacred space. He sent a text message that read like the Holy Week Triduum we just observed: "Life and Chaos; Recovery and forgiveness; New Life and Gratitude." And I realized that is almost like...I would say is exactly like the Holy Spirit had been breathed upon us in that locked room, the doors of which had been flung open by the grace of my friend's story. And when that happens, because we have asked for it, we can participate in the compassionate beloved community of God, yes, one day at a time. Amen.

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