

Peace Be with You

John 20:19-31

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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I was listening to a podcast this week where I heard someone refer to the Sunday *after* Easter as “Low Sunday.”

Attendance often drops.

In our case, the temperature drops. We have been treated to a very unwelcome wintry Sunday.

And energy drops. Our church, like many churches, ours has been through a busy stretch of services and events.

I know that a number of people in our church have been sick and tired (literally) throughout Holy Week and beyond.

Easter Sunday is the highest point of the Christian year—it’s like the mountaintop. We joyfully declare that Christ is risen from the dead, there are flowers and resurrection hymns and Easter goodies and family celebrations.

But we always have to come down, right?

On Tuesday morning I got an early visual confirmation of this general feeling. This is our cross on Easter Sunday morning. And this is our cross after a few days of battering southern Alberta winds.

It’s a good symbol of an important theological truth. We live out the extraordinary hope of resurrection in an ordinary world—a world still marked by sin and death and decay and battering winds.

The anticipated new creation launched by the empty tomb makes its way in the context of old creation. This was true of Jesus’ first followers and it’s been true ever since.

So, what do we do now that Easter has come and gone for another year?

Well, the first thing we do is get our theology right and remember that Easter *hasn't* come and gone for another year.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a year-round reality, the foundational truth that makes the Christian life possible every day of the year.

And beyond that, we remember that Easter is not a day but a season. Christians have historically celebrated Easter as a season that *begins* on Easter Sunday and extends for fifty days until Pentecost.

But even after we acknowledge all this... Easter Sunday still feels like the peak and now we descend into the valley.

What now? How do we live as resurrection people throughout the year?

Last week, Peter was our guide as we looked into walking through the door opened by resurrection. This week, we're behind closed doors with Thomas.

"Doubting Thomas," we call him, despite the fact that Mary and the other disciples wouldn't have believed unless they had seen him either.

We should remember that the disciples didn't believe the women who first encountered the risen Christ either—it seemed to them an "idle tale."

So, Thomas is hardly alone in needing to see to believe. Thomas just gets a bad rap because he demanded what the others got as the surprise of a lifetime.

But on to the story itself. Let's set the stage:

All of the events of Holy Week are in the rearview mirror—arrest, crucifixion, burial.

Mary and the disciples have discovered an empty tomb, but in the early stages have no idea what it means (they assume someone has taken the body).

And then, Jesus appears! First to Mary, then later to the disciples (minus Thomas who was evidently out getting groceries or something).

The disciples are overjoyed. But Thomas missed the party and he can't believe it actually happened.

I doubt many of us have a hard time putting ourselves in Thomas's shoes at this point.

It's one thing to hear about the risen Jesus from others. Thomas knows that the tomb was empty. He knows that his friends *say* they have seen Jesus alive. But he wants to see for himself.

A week later, he gets his wish. The disciples are behind locked doors again and all of a sudden Jesus is there.

“Unless I see” becomes actual *seeing*! And what does Thomas see?

Well, he sees a physical Jesus.

Not a ghost. Not an apparition. Not an inspiring metaphor for hope. Not a mystical encounter with the spiritualized object of his longing.

No, he *sees* Jesus.

He sees the wound where the spear dug into Jesus' side. He sees the hands that had ugly metal spikes driven through them.

He sees his friend, his teacher, his Messiah—the very man that he had seen bleeding and dying on that Roman cross.

Before Christianity was ever a “world religion” or a “worldview” or a set of “doctrines” about God or anything like that, it was the dumbstruck, open-mouthed response to the shattering surprise of seeing and touching and hearing and eating with the risen Christ!

The early church was quite literally shocked into existence, dragged almost reluctantly and fearfully from an empty tomb to the promise of new life.

But we are two thousand or so years down from that initial shock. What does Jesus' encounter with Thomas have to say to us all these years later?

I don't often have “three-point sermons” but I want us to notice three important truths. I have very cleverly (and alliteratively) called these “Three truths from Thomas.”

1. The risen Christ still has wounds

This is worth pondering. Jesus doesn't emerge from the tomb and appear to his disciples as a shiny, scrubbed up superhero. He doesn't just shrug off the evidence of crucifixion as a speed bump on the superhighway to new creation.

And I don't even think his wounds remain as a kind of object lesson for the disciples, as if to eliminate the possibility of saying, "Maybe we just *thought* we saw him die up there..."

The cross has permanently left its mark up on Jesus.

Debie Thomas reflects on the wounds that remain in an article I read this week:

We live in a culture that worships artifice. All around us, people package themselves, market themselves, pummel themselves into versions of perfection that choke their souls. But if Jesus, even at the apex of his resurrection victory, sported his open wounds without shame or apology, then maybe we don't need to worry so much about glossy presentation. Maybe Christianity's best appeal is in its willingness to embrace real bodies, real scars, real pain.¹

Jesus carries his wounds into the reality created by resurrection. This is a deep mystery.

And as someone who has not yet suffered deeply, I want to be very careful about what I say here.

The Christian hope is that one day, wounds will be healed—the pains that have afflicted us, the traumas we've endured, the scars we've accumulated will no longer define us in the new creation.

And I think this is true. They will not *define* us. But perhaps they will never finally cease to be part of our story, even if their only role is to recede into the background.

We believe that the life of Christ will one day swallow up death and pain, but it will not obliterate us in the process—it will not eliminate the people we have been and the things that have formed us along the way, even suffering.

Jesus never ceases to be the One who was crucified, the Word who was made flesh for our sake, the One whose punishment has become our peace. These things remain true, even for the resurrected Christ.

Again, this is a deep mystery. But I think that for those who suffer, it is comforting to know that the resurrected Christ still bears his wounds. For those who have been scarred by life—physically,

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2179>

emotionally, relationally, spiritually, can see themselves in the Christ who carries his scars into the new creation.

Maybe a musical analogy will help (I offer this as a non-musician)!

As all metaphors are, it's limited. But perhaps in the risen Christ, suffering is transposed into a different key—the key of victory.

The wounds don't disappear, they don't cease to be visible. But the song they're a part of sounds different.

2. The risen Christ comes looking for us—even behind locked doors.

I love this aspect of the story. Jesus comes to the disciples. He doesn't supernaturally summon them out to some mountaintop for a victory speech. He doesn't issue breaking news alert from the Jerusalem temple.

Rather, he goes looking for his friends. He comes to them in their weakness, hiding fearfully behind locked doors.

Hiding is the most natural thing to do when we are afraid isn't it? It's the most natural thing to do when we feel ashamed, or uncertain or feeling faithless and defeated, as the disciples surely must have.

This is what we do when we feel these things. We lock ourselves in, perhaps not behind actual doors, but we have all kinds of ways of closing ourselves off, don't we?

We hide behind our skepticism. We retreat into the imagined safety of what we can prove, what's socially acceptable, the small and bleak parameters of our blasted out secular landscape.

We shrink away from the risk of faith, the risk of love. We don't allow ourselves to believe that we *are* loved by God.

We so often conceive of the life of faith as something that *we* do. We are the ones who seek God on our personal spiritual journeys. And this is partially true.

But Jesus seeks us out in our weakness.

He seeks us out, in all of our fear and doubt and hope and longing. Before we take a step toward Christ, he loves us and looks for us and longs for us.

3. The risen Christ honours our doubts... and calls us beyond them.

Jesus doesn't wag his finger at Thomas and say, "How could you be so faithless and fickle?" He doesn't shake his head and say, "You know, Thomas, you really have trust issues! Why couldn't you accept the testimony of those who saw me? Why didn't remember everything I said to you while I was alive? What's *wrong* with you, Thomas?!"

He doesn't say any of those things.

He says, "Ok, you say you won't believe unless you see and touch? Well ok, then. Here you go. Put your finger in my side. Look at my hands."

Jesus graciously accommodates to Thomas's weakness.

(And, we must remember, Thomas wasn't any more faithless than the others, just more explicit about what he would need to believe!)

Jesus doesn't condemn Thomas. He meets him where he is, and then invites him onward in the journey of faith and discipleship.

Stop doubting and believe.

He does the same for us. He meets us where we are with a word of peace, and then invites us onward on the journey.

He invites us into the risk and the joy and the hope and the promise of the life of faith. He calls us to trust him beyond what we can see and touch for ourselves.

He doesn't condemn Thomas for needing these things. I think we often supply an imaginary second clause to Jesus' words to Thomas. *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe... **and** cursed or less faithful or weak are those who need to see or who struggle to believe.*

But Jesus doesn't say that. He doesn't condemn doubt. He works with it and calls us to keep going beyond it, *despite* it.

He honours the faith that will come to trust on the basis of testimony because he knows that this is how his church will be built.

Jesus first word to frightened disciples behind locked doors is "peace." *Peace be with you.*

What about his last words?

His last words, as we've heard, are "Blessed are those who have *not* seen and yet have believed."

That's us.

Jesus is talking about *us* here. We, who long to see, who would have loved to see, to touch, to hear from Jesus himself.

We, who believe based on the testimony of those first witnesses, we who encounter the risen Christ in bread and wine, in the community of faith, in the new life that is possible in lives given over to the lordship of Jesus.

Jesus calls us blessed.

And we are.

John concludes this chapter by saying that Jesus performed all kinds of other signs not recorded in his gospel, but these are written that we might believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing we might have life in his name.

And we do. And we will.

This doesn't mean that we will never have doubts or be afraid or struggle in the life of faith. It doesn't mean that living into the new reality of resurrection in this time between Christ's Advents will be straightforward and uncomplicated.

But we keep on living into this blessing and this life, because we are convinced that the risen Christ has changed everything, for this life and the life to come.

I close with the words of the British writer Francis Spufford from his book *Unapologetic*. I think it's a beautiful description of the life of faith in the light of Easter.

You accept [faith] as one of the givens of your life. **You learn from it the slow rewards of fidelity.** You watch as the repetition of Christmases and Easters, births and deaths and resurrections, scratches on the linear time of your life a rough little model of His permanence.

You discover that repetition itself, curiously, is not the enemy of spontaneity, but maybe even its enabler. Saying the same prayers again and again, pacing your body again and again through the same movements of faith, **somehow helps keep the door ajar through which He may come...**

[Y]ou make faith your vantage point, your habitual place to stand. And you get used to the way the human landscape looks from there: reoriented, reorganized, different.²

The resurrection of Jesus has changed the landscape. It has given us a new place to stand.

And so we keep on believing, heart, soul, mind and strength.

We keep on seeking the same Jesus who seeks us out, even behind closed doors.

The same Jesus who says, “Peace be with you. Don’t be afraid. Stop doubting and believe.”

Amen.



² Francis Spufford, *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), 208.