

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
April 24, 2022 – 2 Easter
John 20:19-31 – Faith and Doubt
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We just heard the record in John's Gospel of two separate encounters between the risen Christ and his disciples, one when Thomas was not present and one, a week later, when he was. We learn in this gospel lesson, as in others, that Jesus did whatever was necessary to show his disciples that he, the Lord they followed before his death on Calvary, was alive. Death and evil did not have the last word. God's life and love and goodness did. Jesus was alive and ready to give his followers the gift of the Holy Spirit.

John tells us that the first encounter took place "when it was evening" on the day of the resurrection. In John's Gospel darkness and light are frequently contrasted. So by saying "it was evening" John is telling us more than the time of day. He is telling us that the disciples are in darkness because they do not yet understand the events of the past three days and they do not yet believe in Jesus' resurrection. You may remember that in the first chapter of John's Gospel he described Christ in this way: "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:3-5). Jesus' appearance to his disciples who are gathered in fear behind locked doors that Easter evening was the light shining in darkness.

As people who could be recognized as followers of Jesus, the disciples had real reasons to be afraid of the Jewish leaders who had conspired against Jesus. The Jewish leaders could have them thrown out of the synagogue, or worse. They might be harmed or killed. So they stayed together, locked in the house and in their fear. We can also imagine the disciples' grief. They had lost the Lord they loved, the one whom they had followed, the one who had given direction to their lives, the one who was to save their people. How disheartened and confused they must have been! And in the midst of all this fear and grief and confusion, Jesus suddenly appears in the room! The disciples must have been shocked! Jesus greeted them and showed them his hands and his side. He proved to the disciples that he was Jesus, the one who had been crucified – no mistake. "Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord."

Once Jesus knew that the disciples had recognized him, he then commissioned them. He sent them out into the world, as he had been sent by the Father. How did the disciples move from being locked in fear and grief and confusion to being able to accomplish the mission Jesus gave them? By the gift of the Holy Spirit. John tells us that Jesus "breathed on them." A better translation of the Greek is "Jesus breathed into them." Compare this to the story of the creation of man in the book of Genesis: "then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7). The risen Lord gave the disciples new life, abundant life, through the gift of the Holy Spirit. They became a new creation in Christ.

Now let's look at the second portion of this lesson, the story of "Doubting Thomas." Thomas had not been with the other disciples on Easter evening. When the disciples who had seen Jesus told Thomas about their experience, he was not convinced. Thomas told them that he would not believe unless he could see and touch the crucified Lord.

What happened? A week passed. The disciples were gathered again in the house, and this time Thomas was with them. The doors were shut, but not locked. Had their first encounter with the risen Christ dispelled the disciples' fear? Jesus appeared as he had before, greeting them with the words "Peace be with you." And the very next thing Jesus does is turn to Thomas and say, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Jesus immediately offers Thomas exactly what he needs in order to believe. Christ, who had given his life for his friends continues, the same Lord after the Resurrection, to give his disciple, Thomas, what he needs.

After Jesus offers Thomas the proof he needs, Thomas responds, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to Thomas: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." These words are for us as well as for Thomas. We have had glimpses of Jesus – in the Bible or in the Eucharist, in members of the church, in the sick and helpless and needy people in the world, in those we love, in the people who help us. Yes, we know Jesus in part. But, in the words of the hymn, "we walk by faith, and not by sight." We believe that we will know Jesus better, but for now, we live by faith.

For most of us, living by faith also means sometimes living and wrestling with doubt. Much as we believe in God, in Jesus, questions remain. Perhaps the most difficult questions are "Why?" and "Why not?" If God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good – in the language of theology, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent – then why do people suffer from disease, natural disasters, and the results of the moral evil of others, on scales both small and large? If God wants *shalom* – peace, harmony, wholeness, prosperity, and welfare – for God's people (that is, all people), then why does God not intervene to stop disease, natural disasters, and the behavior of people who exploit, neglect, and hurt others? "Why?" and "Why not?"

These questions were brought to my attention by a curious encounter I had the day after Easter three years ago. I was browsing through books at Barnes and Noble. I had noticed a man in late middle age complimenting a salesperson on the store's toy selection. He was large and loud and appeared to be cognitively impaired in some way. A few minutes later he approached me and began to talk. He said his name was Mike. I gave him my attention and he told me a bit about his life. Many years before he had been the passenger in a car that was hit by another car. He suffered brain damage from the accident. My response was sympathetic, and he went on to say that he had come to understand why the accident happened. God wanted him to turn his life away from whatever he was doing at the time and turn instead to God. God had caused the accident. I shared with him one of my fundamental beliefs and said, "I don't think God hurts us." Mike thought for a moment and then replied, "No, but He didn't stop the other car from hitting me."

There in the store, speaking with a man who was brain damaged, the theological problem of theodicy – "why does God permit evil? – confronted me anew. It's a question I have wrestled with, and I imagine some of you have as well. It's a question that may be very much on your minds now, given the tragic events we hear about every day and are helpless to solve. I have never read a theologian who has answered the question completely, though many have shed light on the problem. I have never come to an answer myself. I think for us in our earthly lives this remains a mystery. I will share two thoughts that have meant a great deal to me as I have struggled with this issue.

The first comes from the work of philosopher and Episcopal priest, Marilyn McCord Adams, and the book she wrote in 1999, "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God." She had the courage to challenge the popular sentiment that God never "sends" anyone more than he or she can bear. She had the honesty to acknowledge that people are sometimes crushed by life's burdens, that many innocent people suffer unjustly and find no justice during their lives. How do people of faith understand these realities? Adams believes that our perspective must be wider than this earthly life, that we are called to have faith that God will right the wrongs caused by evil after the death of our bodies. Given that wider perspective, she asserts that we can hold onto our faith in God's infinite knowledge, power, and goodness. Of course, this is still a matter of faith – not proof – but I can believe and trust in this. Perhaps you can, too.

By another curious coincidence, on the day I spoke with Mike the book I found and purchased was written by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, the psychiatrist famous for her work on death and dying. It ended with this quotation: "The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen."

Some people are not crushed by life's heavy burdens but rise above their pain and suffering to become the beautiful people Kubler-Ross describes. How do we understand that? Some people would say that this is the manifestation of the "human spirit." I think there is more to it. I believe that God's Spirit is at work within the hearts and minds and lives of people who are able to transform their pain into glorious compassion.

For isn't this the story of resurrection repeated anew? Jesus never lost the marks of his wounds. He showed them to his disciples to prove that it was he whom they saw. But his wounds no longer bled, his face was no longer distorted by pain, his breath was no longer feebly coming to an end. His wounds were visible but healed. His face was radiant. His breath – his Spirit – was strong enough to send a few frightened men out into the world to change it forever in his Name.

In the Easter season when we rejoice in the resurrection of Christ and in visions of his once crucified body made glorious forever in his risen body, we might do well to think about how our suffering can be transformed by God's grace and our cooperation with God's grace to help us become more beautiful people. We might do well to think about how we might help others so that they are not crushed by the evils in the world. We believe that God works to bring healing and new life and salvation in many mysterious ways, sometimes through us, in the power of the Spirit. For that, thanks be to God! In Jesus' name. Amen.