

“Grieving Thomas”
April 19, 2020

Isaiah 25:6-9
John 20:19-29

I’ve often joked about how the attendance at worship on the Sunday after Easter is a little less than a week earlier—but as I look out at the sanctuary this morning, well, this is ridiculous!

Actually, I am, of course, glad that everyone is at home, keeping yourself and your family safe—and as important, helping to keep your neighbors safe. We are given a great and challenging calling in these days—to stay separate so that in time we may see each other face to face again. You are doing that. And I thank you. We will continue through these days together, joining worship as we are today, in no way rushing toward the end of this, but supporting and encouraging one another, praying for one another, and bearing one another’s burdens.

It’s not always easy, is it?

In late March there was an article in *Harvard Business Review* titled: “That Discomfort You’re Feeling Is Grief.”¹ In it, Scott Berinato, a senior editor at the *Review*, interviewed David Kessler, who has continued and expanded on the work of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, and who has been called “the world’s foremost expert on grief.”

Kessler says that in these days “we’re feeling a number of different griefs. We feel the world has changed, and it has. We know this is temporary, but it doesn’t feel that way, and we realize things will be different.” He mentions “The loss of normalcy; the fear of economic toll; the loss of connection. This is hitting us and we’re grieving.” And it’s a collective grieving that surrounds us: the other people in your home, your neighbors, the people you see at the grocery store, health care professionals—it’s touching all of us.

There’s also a sense of anticipatory grief, “that feeling we get about what the future holds when we’re uncertain...” Kessler says: “Anticipatory grief is also more broadly imagined futures. There is a storm coming. There’s something bad out there.”

That discomfort you’re feeling? It’s grief.

As with every emotion, grief is not something to avoid. It asks to be acknowledged and walked through, that we might learn the lessons it wants to teach us.

So I’m hearing the story of Jesus and the disciples—and in particular that disciple named “Thomas”—in a new way this year.

As the Gospel of John tells the story of Easter, the day draws to a close in *fear*. The One the disciples had followed has been crucified. They seem to have found no encouragement in Mary Magdalene’s bold announcement to them earlier in the day—“I have seen the Lord!”

As the Gospel of John tells the story of Easter, the day draws to a close in *isolation*. The disciples come together behind locked *doors*—note the plural, they aren’t taking any chances.

In fear and isolation the followers of the crucified Jesus confront what has been lost and anticipate the storms to come.

They grieve.

It is in their grief—in their fear and isolation—that the risen Christ comes to them.

But—and this is crucial—he does not come as one who says, “Don’t worry. Look, it will all go away.” No. He comes and shows his wounds.

One way to help a person in the anxiety of their grief is to anchor them in their current physical reality. Where are you? What do you see?

So the risen Christ comes and *shows* his wounded hands and pierced side. Look. Anchor yourself in this reality.

Christians have always understood Jesus as both resurrected *and* wounded. He has always been portrayed as both risen from death *and* still bearing the marks of crucifixion. He comes to those who are afraid, he comes to those who suffer and sorrow. And still he says, “Peace be with you.”

And this is how he comes even to us, even today.

To frightened hearts he speaks a word of peace.

To those who are weary he speaks of *shalom*—wholeness, healing.

To those who are isolated he says a second time so that we get the message: “Peace be with you.”

Let those words sink into your own grieving hearts and souls today.

Peace be with you.

We Christians make very strange, very specific claims. We say that God vindicated Jesus in raising him from the dead. That is, the resurrection is God’s announcement that the way of Jesus Christ—the way of love, the way of peace, the way of healing, the way of confronting the powers of this world—the way of Jesus Christ is indeed the way of the universe.

God raised Jesus.

But—and this is significant—God did not restore Jesus to some pre-Good Friday wholeness. The risen Christ speaks to us in our suffering from out of his own suffering. Only when they see his wounds do the disciples recognize Jesus and rejoice. Only when we hear the *crucified* and risen Christ do we ourselves find reason to rejoice even in the midst of all that wears us down and threatens us, that is, even in the midst of our grief.

Thomas famously wasn’t there when the risen Christ appeared on that Easter evening. When he arrives, the other disciples tell him over and over again: “We have seen the Lord!” They try to tell him about being locked away and of their surprise. They sputter out words about hands and sides. They tell him everything has changed.

Thomas stares back at them.

It's not doubt, I now think, as much as it is his own uncomprehending grief. His mind races. His pulse increases as does his own physical pain. All that he asks is that he would have the same experience that the rest of the disciples had—the experience of the wounded Jesus that allowed them to see the resurrected Christ.

Can we hear those words for what they are: the mournful, sorrowing desire of one who has lost everything of value, the brave naming of his own grief even in the face of the excitement of others. When we name and acknowledge our grief, we have taken a step toward managing our grief.

John doesn't tell us what happened over the intervening seven days—how the stunned disciples spent their time, whether they spoke any kind words to Thomas or spoke to him at all, what Mary Magdalene did as she replayed in her mind her own encounter with Jesus.

A week later in the same room, behind the same locked *doors*, the risen Christ once again speaks those Easter words: "Peace be with you."

Thomas, who had acknowledged his sorrow and his fear, is there. In his grief, he has not been abandoned by his friends. Again, in his grief, he has not been spurned by the risen Christ, who offers Thomas his hands and his side.

Perhaps we could even say that it was only as Thomas lived into his grief that he was able to see the wounded hands and the pierced side, able to see the risen Christ.

"Blessed are those," this Jesus says, speaking down through the ages. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

The power of the resurrection is not limited to a small group of people who were in one place on one day; it is not limited to ancient people in ancient times.

The power of the resurrection comes to us.

When we face the most difficult, the most trying, even the most brutal situations that life can bring us, God is not far away, distant and removed. God is close at hand, knowing our sorrow and our fear, yes, but also sharing our wounds and even showing the same.

This Sunday after Easter, as we bring our own sometimes dispirited, disappointed, and dejected selves to worship, there is good news.

It is the good news of Easter. Not the Easter long ago, but the Easter that continues to occur in our lives, in our congregation, and in our world.

We are sent into the world with the peace that the risen Christ offers.

To Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's classic five stages of grief, David Kessler has added a sixth: finding meaning in our grief. He says: "I did not want to stop at acceptance when I experienced some personal grief. I wanted meaning in those darkest hours. And I do believe we find light in those times."

What meaning might we find in these days, in this grief?

We get some sense of new resurrection meaning when Christ tells us to go into the world as he went into the world.

Now, don't run out of your homes just yet. We will not take this literally, but we will see the direction in which we are pointed.

We are to love one another as Christ loved us—no small task—and in this way show the love of God.

We are to forgive as we have been forgiven—never an easy task, and perhaps even more difficult in these days that call us to extra compassion and understanding.

We are to confront the powers of greed and death around us.

So that we might be those who love and forgive and seek the common good, the Spirit of God is given to us. This Spirit, the Gospel of John tells us, is the “Comforter.” Now this does not mean that the Spirit is the One who pats our hand and says, “There, there, everything will be all right.” The comfort of God is different from this—and far greater. Comfort, remember, comes from the Latin *fortis*, strong. To “com-fort” is to strengthen much. And would we dare attempt to be those who love, who reconcile, who speak truth to power if we did not have the strength of God?

Out of our grief, new meaning, new purpose will be discovered.

It won't happen quickly. We will search for it and we will wait for it.

After Easter, the vision of the prophet Isaiah is still our hope:

an end to hunger—a great feast provided for all people;

an end to sorrow—the wiping away of tears;

an end to shame—the removing of indignities from the people;

an end even to *the end*—the destruction of death.

Then with all creation we, too, would say: “This is our God for whom we have waited; let us rejoice and exult in our deliverance.”

¹ Scott Berinato, “That Discomfort You’re Feeling Is Grief,” *Harvard Business Review*, March 23, 2020, <https://hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-youre-feeling-is-grief>