

Sermon: April 19, 2020 – John 20: 19-31**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

One assumption that I bring to sacred texts, is that these ancient words can always speak into our present situation.

Take, for example, today's reading from John, with the disciples gathered behind closed doors, and Christ suddenly appearing in their midst.

In a typical year, I might focus on their being "gathered together" because in a typical year, we would be gathered together, singing together, praying together, seeking grounding and guidance for the days and weeks ahead, milling around and visiting over a cup of coffee. In this year, though, I can identify more with their being "behind locked doors", because that describes much of my day, every day. Earlier that day Mary Magdalene declared to them that Christ was risen, yet the disciples still have uncertainty tinged with fear about what comes next. While I wouldn't say I am particularly fearful in these days, largely thanks to the extraordinary efforts of our front-line medical personnel, the disciples' sense of edginess about what comes next is something that most definitely connects for me. So far, social distancing seems to be working well at "flattening the curve" here in Canada and in the Bow Valley, but now we wonder, what next? More of the same? For how long? How will we know when it's safe to relax the regulations?

Our first points of connection, then, with this reading is some similarity in our settings: they were behind closed doors, so are many of us. They were concerned about chaotic happenings around them, and how to stay safe in the midst of that, and so are we. They were gathered as a community of love – and we, well, we can phone and Zoom and text and email and Skype. We may only be able to gather in a virtual sense, but attentive, caring community – well, that can still happen and is still happening.

The second point of connection for us this morning, is what Jesus does when he comes into the disciples' presence. If this was your story to write, what do you think the risen Christ MIGHT have done in this situation? He could have gone around the circle one by one, enumerating how they had let him down. Peter, in particular, could have received a thorough dressing-down from Christ for denying him three times over. Christ could have pushed them to choose, right then, where their allegiance was going to lie. Or he could have leveraged this moment to really solidify his authority with them, chiding them to pay better attention to what he had taught them and shown them, and to do what he says.

But he didn't do any of that. Instead, he chose as his first words of this new way of being, these words: 'Peace be with you.' And the second words he said to them? Again, 'Peace be with you.' In April of 2020, when there is much to worry us, the Holy One comes to us, not with words of warning or judgment or accusation, but with that same simple phrase: "Peace be with you." Whatever your role these days, trying your best to keep physical distance from others, or caring for a loved one, or on the front

lines at the hospital or clinic or pharmacy, that same message is for you: “Peace be with you.”

This peace Jesus speaks of isn't just an absence of something – the absence of violence, the absence of stress, the absence of threat. No this peace is the sense of being at one with God's goal of healthy co-existence; it's the sense that the gift of love is alive in you, and around you; it's a sense of alignment with Christ's promise of a new day, where the harmonies of right relations take over from the chest-thumping, weapon-bearing, self-aggrandizing yells of dominance. The peace that Christ gives to anyone willing to recalibrate their lives to the ways of love, is shockingly active, because it is always looking for someplace to make a difference, someplace to address an injustice, someplace to be the human face of love.

Three weeks ago, when engaging the story of the raising of Lazarus, we looked at the way Jesus' absence and presence function in that story. In today's reading, following the raising of Jesus, we again encounter absence and presence. At Good Friday, the absence of Jesus ached in the disciples' souls, but now Christ is present to them, and remains present to those who love him, even now. And there is, in this 20th chapter of John another story of absence and presence: the saga of his disciple Thomas.

Forever labelled “doubting Thomas,” I've always thought this disciple gets treated somewhat unjustly in this story. The main thing he is guilty of, it seems to me, is his absence: not being there when everyone else was. What he asks for, is reassurance that his friends aren't just leading him on. “I want to know it's really Jesus” says Thomas, “by putting my finger into the wounds of his hands and my hands in his side.” Kind of a creepy request, but the rest of them had received first-hand evidence and Thomas wanted some too.

And what does Jesus do? Again, imagining what could have happened in this exchange, Jesus does not cast Thomas out of the room. He does not challenge him verbally, even if he seems a bit miffed by Thomas' demands. And he does not refuse the request. What Jesus does do, is invite Thomas: go ahead, brother, get what you need in order to be with me. And in the act of inviting Thomas, Jesus – alive but still bearing those earlier wounds - makes himself vulnerable, available, physically open. In classic Christian terms, the woundedness and sufferings of the Christ meet Thomas and the rest of us in our most difficult times, letting us know that there is nothing on God's side of the equation that separates us from love.

Thomas, poster boy for doubt, cares enough about Jesus to wonder out loud. Thomas yearns enough for Jesus, to actually name that yearning. Thomas the skeptic is also Thomas the seeker. And that wondering and yearning and seeking is met, not with reproach, but with an invitation to take that next step... to seek answers to the deep questions of the soul... to have an embodied connection with God's deep agenda of Love. In these days we live in, those same invitations are present: to take the time available to us right now, to go so deep in our spiritual wonderings, that we emerge with

a fresh sense of awe toward this glorious gift of life; to go so deep in our spiritual yearnings, that we emerge with a new desire to fully live; to go so deep in our search for meaning and purpose, that we emerge with a refreshed relationship with all of life. I hear more and more people perceiving that these days of being separated from everything we considered to be “normal” has the potential for a huge and much needed societal re-set, into ways that are more just, more loving, more considerate of the lives lived by others, more sensitive to the needs of a threatened earth. Although Thomas is often imagined to be a step behind the others when it comes to belief, there are ways that he ends up a step ahead, because his wonderings bring him so close to what really matters.

What part of this sacred story – of Jesus showing up even when the doors are closed, of words of peace, of Spirit bestowed, of doubts invited and God’s own vulnerability offered - intersect with where you are right now? What parts of this story elicit new questions in you? What parts of this story affirm or challenge who you hope to be once our society enters its “new normal”? What parts of this story might help to shape us as a Church or as a town, as we seek wisdom moving forward? What parts of this story might break down whatever distance we may feel, between our hearts, and the passionate love of God?

May these wonderings – offered in the presence of an open, vulnerable, passionate God – lead us in honesty and hope into the coming week. Thanks be to the Christ who finds us, even when the doors are closed. Amen.

References cited:

“Doubting Thomas” – discussion on <https://english.stackexchange.com/questions/340466/secular-alternative-to-doubting-thomas>

“Peace be with you” – instances catalogued on <https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/phrases/Peace-Be-with-You>

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