

“Resurrection in the Plural”

John 20:19-31

April 19, 2020

It was the first day of the week. The same day the women had awoken early to visit the tomb. The same day the earthquake had rolled the stone away. The same day that an angel had delivered the news: “He is not here, He is risen.” It was the first day of the week, the day of resurrection, the day when God’s definitive pronouncement of life had silenced all the powers of sin and death.

It was the first day of the week and where were the disciples? Huddled behind locked doors, gathered in the room where Jesus had broken bread, poured wine, washed feet and predicted that his friends would desert him. By evening the next day, they had. The same disciples who had promised to follow Jesus to the end, no matter what that meant, were now spending Easter evening in hiding.

John tells us the reason for their secretive gathering: fear. The disciples were afraid; afraid that the same fate that Jesus met might be awaiting them. So here they are, on the first day of the week, meeting in terror, listening fearfully for every step on the staircase and every knock at the door.

And what about us? Only seven days ago, we celebrated Easter with the stunned women who came early to the tomb, who were the first witnesses to the resurrection, who overcame their own fear to become the preachers of the Gospel. At the tomb, they heard the words that stand at the heart of our faith, words that most of us need to hear repeated on a weekly if not daily basis—“do not be afraid. He is Risen!” The message of Easter. We celebrated the best ways we could. We found joy in this promise of new life.

And then, the sun went down on Sunday night and came up again on Monday morning. And, despite the genuine hope and the palpable possibilities you

sensed on that day of resurrection, the headlines did not change. The realities around us seemed entirely unimpacted by the good news of Jesus raised from the dead. It was as if the rest of the world had not gotten the message. And as the days passed by, perhaps you began to feel the gnawing presence of doubt creeping back into your heart and mind. Maybe you woke in the night with more anxieties than alleluias. Maybe you found your peaceful easy resurrection feeling could not hold up when your sweet child got out of bed for the seventh time with a new excuse—sorry, that might just be me. The angel promised that Jesus would be ahead of us, but we’ve gone looking and might be wondering if we’re in the wrong story. It’s been a long week.

This Sunday, we encounter a group of disciples who have not yet heard the words of the angel, who have not yet seen the Risen One, who sit hunkered down in a locked-up upper room, stuck in Friday gloom. But it’s not Friday. It’s the *first* day of the week. This is the only clue that John gives to us the readers. It is the first day of the week—resurrection day. And these disciples must be resurrected from the fear that has overcome them.

Notice again what happens in that room. Jesus appears—though the doors are locked. He greets the disciples, “Peace be with you.” Then he does something that seems quite odd—even irresponsible in the age of six-foot separation and social distancing. Jesus breathes on the disciples. Breath. It’s a symbol for the Holy Spirit. In the Early Church, before someone was baptized the priest would breathe on the person, as a sign of the new life that they had received.ⁱ

If you, or someone you love, has ever suffered from a panic attack, you know that fear can manifest itself as breathlessness. If you’ve ever had the wind knocked out of you or struggled to regain regular breath in a

moment of over-exertion, you know how powerless it feels to lose, even momentarily, the ability to breathe. Of course, in the time of the coronavirus, no one needs to be reminded of the precious gift of breathing. As we keep close watch of our own breath and as a GM plant in Kokomo produces ventilators, this most basic blessing is no longer one we take for granted. On Monday, after a fearful weekend awaiting news about a dear friend in another state, we received a text that included these words— “Hallelujah! Good news today—he is down to four liters of oxygen and is doing well on his own without the ventilator.” Happy tears followed. Breath is life. We know that in an existential way these days.

When Jesus breathes on the disciples, he gives them new life. Barbara Brown Taylor calls it “divine CPR,” his own breath to bring them back to life. Just as God breathed into the clay and so human creatures were born, the Risen Christ now resurrects the disciples from the breathlessness of fear. He transforms them... he raises them from the depths of despair and lifts them into a living hope. He turns their fear into joy.

But, there is one disciple missing that evening in the upper room. Didymus. The twin. Thomas. The doubter. At least that’s the way most of us were taught to identify him. The one who had trust issues. He needed more proof. Thomas wasn’t content with the Gospel message. In other words, he needed physical evidence. Upon closer reflection, I think we have to conclude that old Thomas has taken more criticism than he deserves. Doubt is, after all, an almost ubiquitous response to the message of resurrection. The women at the tomb, the two friends on the road to Emmaus, the disciples in the upper room, Peter on the beach. All doubting Thomases.

What sets Thomas apart, I think, is the graphic nature of his insistent request. And, here again, I think we preachers sometimes miss the message if we are overly captive to the accumulated interpretation. Thomas wants to see the mark of the nail. He wants to touch the wounds suffered on the cross. In the traditional reading of this demand, Thomas is cast as the agnostic holdout, not trusting the truth of the resurrection without physical proof. But I’m not so

sure about that. There’s another possibility here, one that is filling my heart and mind these days. Thomas wants to see and feel the wounds. He wants to know for himself that this resurrected Christ is the same Jesus whose message of love and mercy and forgiveness has transformed his life. He doesn’t need to know that Jesus overcame suffering; he needs to know that Jesus experienced suffering—that the Risen One returns with visible evidence that he knows the depth of human pain.

This is an Easter message tailor-made for 2020. As a matter of personal confession, I must say that I have grown weary of pastors who proclaim a Christ who, like a magic potion or a spiritual sneeze-guard protects the truly faithful who act in opposition to the best God-given wisdom of those whose knowledge is saving lives. The Jesus whom I have met in scripture, in prayer, and in community—the Christ whose resurrection I celebrate—is the one who weeps over the death of a friend, whose experience of suffering is not wiped away by the transformational power of resurrection. I do not envision this Christ presiding over large gatherings of triumphalist worshippers in these days. I see him sitting silently at the bedside of one who fades from this life in total isolation. I see him comforting those who must grieve at a distance. I see him bearing his own suffering for the children of God he loves without condition and without end.

Thomas wants to know what we all want to know—that the Messiah he worships knows the breathlessness of fear and the gasps of grief that are common to all humanity. And, if that is true, this means that Easter matters not just for the one who was raised on that triumphant morning. Easter matters for those behind doors closed and locked in the breathlessness of fear. Easter matters for those whose weary lungs cannot bear the shouts of Alleluia, who must whisper their praise in pain. Easter matters for all this hurting, groaning, aching, breathless world.

Last week we celebrated the resurrection of Jesus Christ, that is, resurrection in the singular. This week, John will not let us forget that the church itself has been

raised from death. This week, we celebrate resurrection in the plural, the rebirth of the disciples on the first day of the week. And we seek to follow in their footsteps. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.

After the gospel writer John tells the stories of Jesus' resurrection appearances, he looks out across generations and writes words directed to us: "Jesus did many other signs that are not recorded, but these are written *so that* you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that you may have life in his name." The purpose of John's gospel is to inspire the faith of future generations, to provoke plural resurrection.

The good news of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is this: it did not stop outside the tomb on Easter morning—Christ is alive, and because of this the church can be as well. Jesus, after breathing the Spirit upon the disciples, sends them out into the world. Resurrected, brought, these disciples are barely given a moment to catch the breath they have just received. They are sent into a world full of violence and pain and called to be makers of peace. They are sent into a world full of injustice and oppression and called to proclaim the righteousness of God. They are sent into a world that is overwhelmed by lies, and they are asked to share Gospel truth. They are sent into a world held captive by the power of sin and they are called to proclaim the freedom of the children of God. These disciples, like you and I, are sent into the world, full of resurrection power.

Beloved—the resurrected Christ knows the pain we feel and the grief we bear. The Risen One breathes new life into us all when we need it the most. That's good news for a weary world. Amen.

ⁱ Thanks to Cam Murchison, former Dean of the Faculty at Columbia Seminary and my teacher in a class on Baptism and Evangelical Calling, who shared this fact with me.