

Wesley United Methodist Church
Easter 1
April 19, 2020
Easter is for Real Peopleⁱ
Scripture: John 20:19-31

Last week was Easter and it was different than Easter has been in the past, but the Good News was still the same. God had overcome death and Life had won the victory. We proclaim that we are Easter people; people who believe in resurrection and hope.

But Easter is not just something that happened a long time ago. Easter is for real people. The people we read about in the Bible were real. What they felt was real. That's really good news for us today – because Easter is for real people today – it's for you and for me.

We may not feel much like we are living in Easter time right now. Sometimes it feels much more like we are living in Saturday – an in-between time, waiting, wondering when we will be able to stop wearing masks and not worry about being at least 6 feet away from other people. We long for the day when we will not be locked inside our homes.

On that Easter day, even though Jesus had risen from the dead, the disciples did not yet know that; and ten of them were locked inside a room because they were afraid. Two of the disciples were not there: Judas who had betrayed Jesus and Thomas who becomes the focus of a second appearance by Jesus.

Behind locked doors, gathered in fear, the disciples must have been rehashing the events of that week. Presumably, by this time, they had all heard Mary's testimony that she had seen Jesus, that he was alive, but still they gathered in fear that night.

Suddenly, Jesus appeared among them. They did not unlock the doors to let him in. He simply appeared and stood among them and immediately he spoke to their fear. "Peace be with you!" Jesus met them where they were. He met them in their fear. He didn't scold them for being afraid. He didn't scold them for hiding. He came to them where they were and spoke to their greatest need; just as he speaks to ours. "Peace be with you."

Just a few short days before, he had gathered with his Disciples for their last meal together. At that meal, he had spoken to them about peace; he had assured them that "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

We frequently quote those words at a funeral service. We do so because they are a reminder that Jesus is present and offers his peace, comfort, and courage any time we need it. I looked back at a sermon from three years ago and found these words, "We live in a time when the world seems to be on edge. There has been fear of long-range missiles, violence and hatred seem to be strong, economic anxieties are widespread. Where is the word of hope for a world that is in so much pain and fear?"

Replace what was then the immediate fear of "long range missiles" with the immediate fear of today "Covid-19" and this sounds like today. So, the question then, is again the question for today, "Where is the word of hope for a world that is in so much pain and fear?" Our lives and our world have known a lot of pain and fear. That is nothing new.

Think about what you do when you are afraid? How do you calm your fears? For most people, that hope begins when we realize that no matter what is happening, we do not need to face it alone.

That is why when something happens people often gather in the streets to be with others, to hear what's happening, and to know that they are not alone. That's why on the Sunday following September 11th many of our churches experienced a much higher than usual worship attendance. People came looking for hope; looking for someone with whom to share their fear and looking for something that would offer a word of hope, comfort, and courage.

Today, we are not able to gather in the streets to be with others. We are not able to gather in sanctuaries to be comforted by stained glass windows, altars, a pastor in a robe and a choir singing. For some that makes it even more difficult. Digital worship is great, but sometimes we just need other people face to face. "Maybe you have been – or are currently – frightened, anxious, or lonely. If so, in what ways have you experienced the presence of Jesus with you during this time?"ⁱⁱ

Because it is at these times, especially, that Jesus is standing in our midst proclaiming, "Peace be with you." Despite all the hurt and harm that the world can and does inflict, despite our separation from each other, despite our fear, God's compassion and care embodied in Jesus stands again in the midst of the disciples, and in our midst. The one who offers us peace is the one who walked this earth as a man, who taught and healed, who was betrayed, hated, and put to death. The one who offers us peace is the one who has faced all that the world can dish out and has survived it to come back to us and to offer us his peace.

I invite you to think about how you know that Jesus is with you. What difference does his presence make in your life as you deal with our current reality?ⁱⁱⁱ

After speaking these words to the disciples, he showed them his hands and his side, where he had been pierced by a sword. I used to think that it was strange that the risen Jesus would have the marks of the sword in his hands and side – I would have thought that his body would have been perfectly healed and the wounds would no longer exist.

What is your reaction to the scars that remain on Jesus' body? Take a second and let your immediate feelings come to the surface.^{iv}

I have come to believe that the wounds are there for several reasons. The first and most obvious one is that the disciples needed the assurance that the one who is speaking these words of peace is the same one who was crucified, dead and buried. There is no question that it is the same person – the one whom they have loved and followed. This is not some angel, or group hallucination. This is the real Jesus, dead but now alive; wounded and still bearing the scars.

I have also come to believe that the reason that the risen Jesus still has the wounds is as a reminder to us that when we are wounded in life, even after we have survived and come out on the other side, we still carry the wounds and scars with us. Those wounds and scars can become a reminder to us and a witness to others of the possibilities of life.

A person who has lived through the pain of a divorce may be able to help another through that pain. A person who is a survivor of domestic violence may be able to help another person understand that she is not alone and that there are things that can be done. A person who has battled cancer may understand like no one else can. Our wounds and scars may be just what God can use to help another person deal with the fears and hurts of life. Our wounds and scars from this pandemic may help us

understand how intimately connected we are with the rest of the world and how truly dependent we are upon each other.

Jesus came to the disciples in their fear and brought them peace. He came with the wounds of his crucifixion and showed them that he was the same person that they had known, who had died and was now alive.

Jesus then gave his disciples a mission. “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” He breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” He had told them during that last meal that the Holy Spirit, the comforter would come and be with them. He is sending the disciples and us on a mission to make God and God’s ways known in the world.

John tells us that Thomas wasn’t with the other disciples when Jesus appeared to them. We don’t know where he was, but his absence on this occasion has probably unfairly earned him the title, Doubting Thomas. It may be that Thomas needed to be alone right then. Or maybe Thomas was the designated shopper sent out to get some food.

All we know is that he was not there and that when the disciples told Thomas what had happened, he found it impossible to believe. Before we are too harsh with him, remember that the other disciples who had heard from Mary Magdalene that Jesus was alive, were still gathered in a locked room in fear until Jesus appeared to them.

Their account to Thomas must have fit into the category of “too good to be true”. He wanted to see the nail marks in Jesus’ hands and touch the wound in his side. Let us remember that this is exactly what Jesus showed the other disciples when he appeared to them.

Jesus never expressed impatience with his disciples’ skepticism, and for that I am grateful. I have known people who thought that there was one way to respond to God and if you didn’t respond in that way then you

weren't really a believer. I celebrate that God made each of us as individuals with different needs, different likes and dislikes, different passions, different desires, so that God can reach out to each of us in the way that meets us where we are.

A week later, the disciples were together again, and this time Thomas was with them. John tells us that the doors were still locked, but Jesus came and stood among them and again said, "Peace be with you." "Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here, see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.'"

Jesus did not scold Thomas. He met Thomas where he was and offered him what he needed. He knew Thomas and he loved Thomas; just as he knew and loved each of his disciples. Thomas, when faced with the risen Christ, said, "My Lord and My God!" This is one of the strongest and clearest declarations of faith found in the New Testament.

"Are you able to say with Thomas: My Lord and my God? If so, say it to Jesus now. Imagine, Jesus breathing his Holy Spirit into your heart. Wherever you are, allow yourself to be filled with the peace that Jesus brings."^v

The disciples have one more encounter with Jesus in John's Gospel and Thomas **was** with the other disciples on that occasion. Jesus sent his disciples out to tell the world about God and God's ways and Thomas took this very seriously.

Church traditions tells us that he preached in ancient Babylon, where Iraq is today, in Persia – present day Iran, and went as far as the east coast of India. When the Portuguese landed in India in the early 1600s they found a group of Christians there – the Mar Thoma Church established through Thomas' preaching over 1500 years earlier. A sacred

memorial called the Saint Thomas Mount, marks the place in India where tradition has it that Thomas was killed around 72 AD.

Thomas, who we call the Doubter, came to believe so fervently that he spent the rest of his life preaching the Christian message of love and forgiveness to what were then the ends of the earth.

This particular Gospel lesson is a favorite of mine as an Easter story because it reminds us first that Jesus came to the disciples in the midst of their fear and brought them peace. He came to real people, who were experiencing real emotions and he comes to us in whatever condition we find ourselves. He meets us where we are with what we most need.

Secondly, the Jesus who appeared to his disciples was most definitely the same Jesus who had been crucified, dead and buried. He showed the wounds of the crucifixion to them. He reminds us that our wounds and scars can be used by God as a powerful witness to new life. He breathed on them and gave them the Holy Spirit, the comforter, the one who would always be with them guiding them and us every step of the way.

Finally, he sent them on a mission – the same mission on which he sends us. They, and we, are sent out into the world to witness to God, to share the story of Jesus, to tell others about God's love and God's forgiveness, and God's inclusion of all people wherever they may be. The one who has hardwired our brains to seek understanding is also the one who holds the key to our hearts and our lives. Thanks be to God. To live as Easter people means that we can imagine Jesus at our "right hand" counseling us through our days, "peace be with you."

Rev. Cameron Trimble in her meditation for Friday, summed it all up in a way I want to share with you. She wrote, "Here is the one thing that I know. God is with us. I don't know exactly what life will look like for us on

the other side of this, but I know that Love is paving our way. I don't know what economic system awaits us, but I pray that Love will be its underpinning. I don't know what jobs might be invented, but I pray that Love draws up our job descriptions.

“Nothing is fine right now ... but it will be, because God, the Great Love, is with us and in us. We will be ok in time. I know this within every cell of my being. We are all in this together.”^{vi}

Let me share with you a prayer written for this week by Rev. Dr. Jacqueline Brannen^{vii}. Let us pray:

Lord, we sang loud Hosannas on Easter morning.

We praised your holy name and celebrated your victory over death.

We all confirmed that you have Risen Indeed!

And yet today, we are still huddled in our homes; locked in for fear of death.

Like Peter, John and the other disciples, we are not quite certain about our future.

Are we still in danger?

What does your resurrection mean for us as we shelter in place?

Our dreamers and visionaries tell us not to fear.

They share the good news that all is well and all will be well.

Like Thomas, some of us still doubt. Is the resurrection for us as well?

Through the cracks in our homes, the cracks in our souls, Jesus enters.

“Peace, just as the Father sent me, I am sending you. Blessed is the one who believes without seeing.”

“My Master, my God! Send me!”

Amen

ⁱⁱ The sermon title came from a meditation by Pastor Mike Novotny in “Time of Grace” on 4/12/20. Portions of this sermon come from my sermon preached on this Sunday in 2017 and probably from previous sermons for this same week.

ⁱⁱ Pray as you go. Meditation for April 18 & 19, 2020 App on my phone. After this sermon was written, I read the devotion for this weekend, and have incorporated the questions for reflection offered there into this sermon.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} Ibid

^v Ibid

^{vi} Rev. Cameron Trimble. “Piloting Fait: I’m not fine ...” April 17, 2020

^{vii} Rev. Dr. Jacqueline Brannen, District Superintendent, Northern Maine Prayers from the extended Cabinet of the New England Conference of the United Methodist Church April 14, 2020