



Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
April 19, 2020

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Someone asked an old-timer for a bit of wisdom about how to live a good life: “what would you like people to say about you at your funeral as they look at you in your coffin?” And the old-timer replied “I’d like them to say ‘look, he’s breathing!’”

John Russell told us that one-liner during our Zoom prayer and discussion this week. That little joke seemed to fit with the idea of resurrection, Christ’s and our own, which we will be celebrating and meditating on, during these 50 days of Eastertide.

Of course, resurrection is not something that is easy to wrap our heads around, as this morning’s gospel story of St. Thomas reminds us. In case you missed it, we are all Thomas in this story. His reaction to the news of the resurrection is not unique to him, and it is not defective or wrong in some way – his reaction is human, natural, and, I believe, appropriate. The Good News message of God in Christ makes a very bold and, frankly, unbelievable claim in the story of the resurrection: it makes the claim that God has reversed the power of death for Christ and that, someday, God will reverse the power of death for all of us because we are all included in Christ’s death and resurrection.

We should be skeptical of such an astounding claim and we should want to see some evidence that it is true. The question, of course, is what kind of evidence God will choose to provide for us. We are not in a position to dictate to the almighty Creator of all things what sort of evidence we will accept. God comes and goes as he pleases, free and beyond our control, and chooses to speak to us as he wills and when he wills. Thomas was fortunate in having his demands catered to, but as Jesus points out to us at the end of the story, we will not all be so fortunate: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

It seems to me that the question of how to believe in the resurrection is as pressing now as it has ever been in our lives – particularly because of the trauma that the whole world is living through in the current pan-

demic. We certainly shouldn't overstate the case: so far, most of us have only experienced isolation, anxiety, and depression, and not the more tragic struggles of illness and death. Yet, we are not untouched by those greater tragedies, and many of us have friends and family members who are the frontlines of the medical, military, and social services response to illness and death.

We also, shouldn't minimize the crosses we are bearing, just because those crosses aren't as heavy as the crosses that others bear. Isolation, anxiety, and depression are very real and difficult conditions to live through and they have their own ill effects on our health. In talking with many of you through the last few weeks, I sense that we crossed into a new stage of this trial this past week: many have commented to me that our Easter celebrations last weekend, muted as they were, seemed to bring more sadness over what is missing than joy over what God has given us. Perhaps the clearest sign that points to our suffering is the fact that even introverts are now telling me that this is too much isolation!

Whatever novelty there was in this thing, and whatever bemusement we might have felt at these strange circumstances, is wearing off fast. How might we walk through this valley of suffering over the next few weeks in a way that strengthens us spiritually, deepens our understanding of ourselves and God, and enables us to thrive in the midst struggle? The spiritual director and theologian Richard Rohr made a couple of points this week that I found helpful, and I hope you will too, and I think they are especially relevant to our reading of the resurrection through the eyes of St. Thomas.

First of all, we should be mindful of the fact that God is taking our suffering seriously and including us in a conversation about it. The story of St. Thomas illustrates this beautifully. First of all, the simple fact of the resurrection demonstrates that God saw humanity's suffering as personified in Jesus and responded to it by transforming it into resurrection. Secondly, God does not ignore or reject Thomas's legitimate and heartfelt questions. Thomas is heard when he cries out his doubts – and he is answered, drawn into a conversation with God about what resurrection really is and how we can experience it. The lesson for us is that we need to express our deepest doubts, fears, and angers to God, and – if we do – a conversation can begin in which God will take us seriously.

The other point that Rohr made this week is this: we almost always experience faith and transformation after the fact, looking back on how events unfolded. That's because, logically, resurrection follows death, not the other way around. In the midst of the horror of Jesus being lynched by a mob, Thomas probably didn't see,

experience, or feel much of God's presence and grace. God seemed to have disappeared. But when he saw the risen Jesus, it transformed his understanding of all that happened leading up to resurrection.

That means that when we are going through the kind of suffering that we are now experiencing, we need to appreciate that we probably won't feel especially faithful in the midst of it and won't very clearly see God's work in the midst of it. It is only on the other side of this experience, when the resurrection of our more normal lives takes place, that we will look back and see how God's grace gave us faith to endure and all the many ways, large and small, that God was at work in the midst of all this.

This, then, is the evidence of the resurrection that I alluded to in the beginning of this sermon. When we realize that God has taken our suffering seriously and invited us into a conversation about it, that is evidence that we have been united to Christ in his suffering and will be united with him in his resurrection. When we look back on suffering, viewing it with the 20/20 vision of hindsight, and see that God was at work in the midst of all this, that is evidence that the power of God that raised Jesus from the dead is also at work in our lives.

Granted, this may not be evidence that we want, but it may be the evidence that we need. We may want a face to face encounter with Jesus such as Thomas had, but perhaps what we really need – and perhaps the reason Jesus calls us blessed – is the deeper assurance that what God has done for Jesus he is doing and will continue to do for us in the midst of our suffering.

The promise of the resurrection is the promise that God sees and knows what we are suffering, that God's grace is with us, even when we can't see it, and that our hope in God's faithfulness to bring life out of death is rooted in the deepest reality of who God is in Christ.

May our encounters with the risen Jesus, however we experience them, give us the grace to join with Faithful Thomas in saying "My Lord and my God."

Amen.