

Sermon TUMC, April 3, 2016 – Second Easter Year C
John 20:19-31

Now I see

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This story has me thinking about fear and doubt and trust and faithfulness and “belief” – whatever that is.

It has me thinking about breath (*Ruach*) and Spirit, and the giving and withholding of forgiveness –whatever that is.

It has me thinking about how Jesus – who once said, I am the door -- can walk through locked doors, big old tombstones, and through death itself to show up on the other side.

This story has me seeing how Jesus can get past fear (and reason) to find people and speak to them and give them what they need.

Peace be with you!

“You wanna see *my* scars? Here touch them, this is my body.”

Or in the garden earlier, “Mary, it’s me.”

Vulnerable, caring, pointed and real.

This story is about power and fear and wonder and rescue. It didn’t happen on a page in a book – though that is how we read it – it happened in a place, in a space filled with bodies who were interacting with each other, feeling things, sensing things, remembering. It “happened” each time it was retold and imagined by its listeners, until at some point somebody wrote it down.

This story has me wondering what was the look on Jesus’ face when he popped in on the disciples in a cosmic game of peekaboo. Was he laughing? Was he dead serious? Was he tentative? Was he bold?

It has me wondering about the look on the disciples’ faces. Afraid to look? Astounded? Mouths gaping? Freaked out? Checking to see what was in the wine last night?

Was Mary Magdalene in the back of the room with a huge “I told you so on her face?” Did she and Jesus exchange a knowing look from their garden encounter earlier that morning?

How do you imagine it? Did Jesus just appear on the edge of the room, or just – BAM! Right in the middle, all of a sudden?

Were they startled or did it suddenly dawn on them that he was there?

I wonder who came up to Jesus first, what they did and what they said, and how they approached him.

What was it like to have a living breathing Jesus breathe on **them** and say “I’m sending you. Receive the Holy Spirit”?

It has me wondering what I would have done and what are we to do with it now?

First, I’m thinking about Thomas the Twin. All the people who know the spoilers in the story and who have been so keen to create and feed us dogmas and morals in the bible stories over the centuries have called this man “doubting” Thomas -- like that’s a bad thing.

The “moral of the story” people, who want to encourage only one way of understanding all this, and who also want to read Jesus’ words to Thomas as a reprimand. (‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Well, Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’)

I don’t think Jesus was scolding him. His words might be something more along the lines of “Well I can’t do this with everyone, Thomas, but I’ll at least let **you** touch my scars. The others will just have to trust the story when you tell it.”¹

Plus, different people have different ways of coming to faith. I don’t buy the doubting title for Thomas. I think he is that guy who always asks the question that everyone is too afraid to ask.

Back in John 11 when Lazarus died, Thomas says something weird: “Hey, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with him.’” What?

Back in John 14, when Jesus was telling all the disciples about going ahead and preparing a place for them, Thomas was like: “Jesus, we really have no idea what you’re talking about here.”

Well, his exact words (that someone put into writing and translated a few gazillion times and we now read) were: ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?’ That questions sets Jesus up for one of his best lines ever:

¹ “[faith needs] a chance to voice his doubt. And sometimes faith is like that – it needs the freedom of questions and doubt to really spring forth and take hold. Otherwise, faith might simply be confused with a repetition of creedal formulas, or giving your verbal consent to the faith statements of others. But true, vigorous, vibrant faith comes, from the freedom to question, wonder, and doubt....if we don’t have any doubts we’re probably not taking the story seriously enough.”

<http://www.davidlose.net/2016/03/easter-2-c-blessed-doubt/>

“Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. *From now on you **do** know God and have seen God.*”

And in each case when Thomas asks a question, Jesus doesn’t get all annoyed, he “Jesus-splains” to the disciples so that they’ll understand what is really going on right in front of them and sometimes is just beyond their grasp.

Here again in John 20, behind closed doors, Thomas the Twin is faithful to his role in John’s gospel, to ask what nobody else would ask, he says: “I’m not sure what’s going on here, maybe if I see the scars I’ll figure out what is really happening?”

Then Jesus shows up and calls his bluff.

What is the look on Jesus’ face at this point?

Is he amused while showing off his scars? Does it hurt?

And here again Thomas does his part in setting up a very crucial piece of the whole story: his aha moment, he sees it all clearly now and has a literal OMG – Oh, my God -- he says to Jesus “My Lord and my God.”

He gets it, he gets that part about “If you see me, you have seen God.”

And then he’s ready to not be afraid anymore and put his trust in Jesus’ project once again. For that is what belief really means, it means to put your trust in, to have confidence in, to be faithful to someone or something.

Now a word of caution about our bias: For those of us who are hearing this story through the filter of the Scientific method and a cultural idea that believing is for wimps who do not have an intellect, I just want to remind us again that what we have here is not a documentary, it’s not peer-reviewed article nor is it even about Thomas looking for “evidence” as we understand it.

This is somebody’s remembered experience of Jesus that has come down to us over centuries. It’s a memory, we don’t get to agree or disagree with it, we can only enter it and ask if there is anything of God in this account.

(Incidentally, I find it amusing that in a culture of skepticism, I find it amusing that we can click “I agree” on huge legal documents while our software updates, but we feel that we have to stumble over all kinds of things we find in Christian narratives – but that’s another sermon for another time.)

So that’s enough to get us thinking about Thomas and doubt and belief.

As you imagine it, see what happens to the story and Thomas’ perspective in your imagination.

There are a few more observations I get from this story and they are coloured by the fact that we are launching Aurora House – a project born out of TUMC’s desire to be a witness in the city. Where are you in relation to this project? Here are some of the choices from the story: Are you in fear? Are you believing in things unseen” Do you feel breathed on by the Spirit? Do you feel sent?

One might say it is a project that will minister to people who bear scars, scars of trauma of slavery and exploitation.

When I thought about Aurora House project in relation to this story, first I imagined people who, like the disciples, are behind locked doors, very reasonably fearing for their lives as enslaved people. I imagined Jesus’ love somehow reaching them behind those closed doors, giving them peace, breathing Spirit on them, placing in their hands the choice of forgiveness or withholding of forgiveness. This is my prayer for those caught in human trafficking. That Jesus will find them.

Then I flipped it around, a bit more dramatically, and imagined what will happen if/when such traumatized and scarred people as the Aurora House residents or the recent refugees appear in our midst with their stories of torture and their scars and their encounters with the powers of death. How will we react? How will **we** be transformed?

Will we recognize in their vulnerability the face of Christ?
Will we renew our commitment to walk with them and walk with Christ.

It’s getting real, people, and more will be required from us money (though that is always welcome). Jesus sends us and breathes on us to carry out the complex task of reconciliation, the hard work of bearing witness to the tough work of forgiving or not forgiving. We don’t know what that looks like, but we’ll likely figure it out when we see it. You never know what might happen to us next.

So I leave you to follow your own wonderings about this story and what it means for you.

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This story has me seeing how Jesus can break through our fears to find us on the other side and speak to us and give us what we need.

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