



"Resurrecting the Dead"
Scripture – John 20:19-31
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, April 11, 2021

Living in fear and sheltering in place; does that sound familiar? Besides describing our lives during the pandemic, it depicts the scene in today's text from the Gospel of John. The closest followers of Jesus were huddled together somewhere in Jerusalem, cowering behind locked doors. The gospel writer informs us that the door was bolted not for fear of a deadly virus, but "for fear of the Jews."

Hold on a second. Jesus and all of his disciples were Jews. Gentiles would not become followers of Jesus for two decades, so who is John referring to? John, alone among the gospel writers, used the phrase "the Jews" several times in his gospel. It is his shorthand for the Jewish religious leaders who opposed Jesus. But if you do not understand that was John's intention, it sounds anti-Semitic. And you can see why some, in later generations, latched onto John's gospel. With no understanding of the context, they could claim Biblical support for their bigotry. Just blame whatever has gone wrong on "the Jews." We hate to think how many atrocities have been perpetrated by people distorting the biblical record.

So, today, we are looking at a text from Easter evening. While the disciples were in lockdown, Jesus appeared in their midst, and said, "Peace be with you." He wanted to reassure them that death was not the victor and they were not alone. Then, our text adds this thought-provoking sentence: "After Jesus said this, he showed them his hands and his side." He did not display beautiful, unblemished hands. His side was not silky smooth. He held out hands that had been pierced by nails. He revealed his side where the wound was visible.

That's because the resurrection does not erase the crucifixion. The pain of the past is not blotted out. The scars of the crucifixion are a reminder of the depth of God's love. If God is in Jesus, then God does not avoid suffering. The wounds in the body of Jesus reveal that God feels the pain of our world – your pain, my pain. As some theologians have said, God is our fellow-sufferer.

A colleague lifts up a portion of Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*. "A woman notices what used to be a wound on her lover's shoulder and contemplates the advancing wrinkles in his face. She says to herself: 'I thought of the lines life had put on his face...I thought of a scar on his shoulder that wouldn't have been there if once he hadn't tried to protect another man from a falling wall. The scar was part of his character, and I knew I wanted that scar to exist through all eternity.'"¹

The scars on Jesus reveal the character of God. Like a parent who will not abandon her child when life is hell, nothing can separate us from the steadfast love of God.

Today's passage is rich with avenues we could pursue. Many call this the "Doubting Thomas" passage and we could consider the ways our faith is not as deep and vibrant as we wish. We could provide examples of times when life turns grim and our faith fades and our convictions quiver. However, as I pondered the passage, it was its early verses that would not let me go.

After Jesus displayed his scars to the disciples, he said, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you...If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Some act as if the resurrection of Jesus is the end of the story. Jesus has new life after death and we will too. After our clock runs out with whatever unfinished business we still have hanging, we will have new life in God's everlasting kingdom. That is certainly a key component of our faith. However, the writers of the New Testament declare that after the resurrection of Jesus, he appeared to his followers. These appearances were not simply for the sake of confirming that there is another dimension of existence beyond the physical world. Jesus appeared to his followers to commission them and his words are for all who seek to follow him. He hands over to us what we might call the ministry of resurrection. That is, we are called to pour new life into seemingly dead situations.

Are you familiar with the British television program: "The Repair Shop?" People bring their broken family heirloom to an expert craftsman to restore it. There are carpenters, watch makers, potters, and various professionals who can make the cracked and broken look like new. Some people bring beautiful and valuable items to be repaired. Others bring pieces that, well...must have quite a sentimental value – if you get my drift. Commenting on this program, a colleague says the experts, "take the broken, wobbly, long cracked, and bent things and slowly return to them to wholeness."²

That sounds like the ministry Jesus confers upon us, except our focus is not heirlooms, but rather people. And our work can be much more difficult than replacing a spring in his great-grandfather's watch or repairing a crack in her mother's favorite vase, because the work is often focused on restoring relationships that have been broken.

Tom Long shared a story about his wife, Kim, who was the pastor of a congregation in a small town in New Jersey. Over time, the members came to love and trust her. When she introduced the "Passing of the Peace" into their worship service they went along with it. Most of the members did not particularly care for this new part of the service, but they loved Kim, so they did not put up much resistance.

When I say this was a small town I mean that everyone knew everyone else's business. They knew whose kids had a job and were making a living, and whose kids you weren't supposed to ask about.

There was a couple in her congregation who began having difficulties and it was not long before most people knew things were not going well. When he moved out, everyone knew. The wife kept coming to church; he stopped. Each Sunday, she would sit in the same pew and every time they sang a hymn, she cried.

Then, one Sunday, moments before the Passing of the Peace, he showed up. The ushers were surprised to see him and tried to mask their alarm about how uncomfortable his presence might be for some. When he walked up and stood at the end of the pew next to where his wife was sitting, the ushers took a deep breath. When she saw him, she quickly scooted to the other end of the pew. He sat down.

When the pastor invited everyone to pass the peace to those sitting near them, he walked to the end of the pew and faced his wife. She stood there rigid, but he took both of her hands, looked her in the eyes and said, 'The peace of Christ be with you.' She mumbled her response. But when everyone sat back down, he sat next to her.

And she reached over and took his hand and placed it on her lap. When the service ended, they went home together and worked it out.³

God urges us to engage in this ministry of resurrection, which requires love and courage and determination. This ministry is vital for the well-being of our personal lives and for the healing that is needed in our communities. We are challenged to tend to wounds, to mend things that have been torn, and to strive for those things that we know will nourish life.

NOTES

1. James Howell, *Ministry Matters*, April 2, 2021.
2. Rachel Pedersen, "Reconciliation," July 5, 2020.
3. Tom Long, in a sermon at the New Castle Presbytery Retreat, March 1, 2019.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

This prayer borrows language from a Pastoral Prayer posted on Re:Worship (<https://re-worship.blogspot.com>).

Living Lord —
like those first disciples,
we have heard whispers of resurrection.
And, like those first disciples,
we are wondering whether it is true;
we are marveling at the possibility,
and daring to hope.

Like those first disciples,
we are sometimes afraid,
sometimes full of doubt.
But in your extravagant generosity,
in your boundless grace,
you appear to us in our fear,
open wide your arms in love,
and breathe your peace upon us.
Thank you for coming to us as we are,
O God.

Teach us not to hide from our doubt,
but to recognize it as a door to mystery
and to deeper faith.
Teach us to treat seasons of disbelief
as opportunities to seek you,
opportunities to be surprised by grace.
After all,
Thomas' doubt became
a moment of revelation
as he saw and touched you,
and finally believed.

Loving Lord —

Like those first disciples,
whose fear mingled with hope
as they huddled behind locked doors,
we find ourselves in the eternal movement
between fear and faith,
doubt and conviction,
wonder and worry.

However we come to you this day,
we trust that you come to us
and offer us your gift of peace.

Breathe your Spirit upon us, O Christ,
as you breathed upon those first disciples,
and send us forth to proclaim
the good news:

“Christ is risen! Alleluia!”

Breathe your Spirit upon us, O Christ,
and empower us to follow you.

Risen Lord –

With the eyes of faith,
we have seen the mark of the nails;
we have seen your hands and your side.
May this encounter transform us, O God.
Fashion us into a people
who do *not* shy away from the suffering
of this world
but face each day with the hope that comes
from knowing your wounds tell
a resurrection story.
Give us the gifts of faith and of faithfulness,
and send us to follow in the footsteps
of Mary,
and Thomas,
and all who have seen the Lord,
until the whole world experiences
the joy of abundant life.

This we pray in the name of Jesus Christ,
our Resurrected Lord,
and offer the prayer he taught us:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.