



“Rising from the Dead”
Scripture – John 20:19-31
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, April 7, 2024

On a dark night, we peer through a small window to spot the disciples cowering behind locked doors. Tension fills the air, palms are sweaty, and they mumble in hushed tones. They are terrified that they might be discovered and suffer the same fate as Jesus.

Two of the disciples told them that they went to the tomb at dawn and found it empty. Now that they are huddled together, each disciple offering his opinion of what happened. The consensus seems to be that the authorities slipped in when all was dark and quiet, and confiscated the body of Jesus – an attempt to crush the Jesus movement once and for all.

Yet, as they whisper to one another, something stunning occurs that stops them midsentence. Jesus appears in their midst and says, “Peace be with you.” His words echo what he said during their final meal together when he said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you...Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

So much for that advice! Their hearts are plenty troubled, and their minds are gripped with terror. No one is blowing a trumpet or singing the “Hallelujah Chorus.” They are paralyzed by the thought that there is a cross out there with *their* name on it.

The author of this gospel wants us to identify with the disciples. Doubt is a part of human life. No one – not even the first disciples – constantly maintained a confident, doubt-free faith.

However, in case we skipped over the disciples’ lack of faith, the gospel writer mentions that one of the disciples was absent on Easter evening – Thomas. I wonder why he wasn’t there. Was he hiding out at another undisclosed location? Was he drowning his sorrows in a nearby pub? Our gospel writer falls silent.

Our text says that Thomas was called “the Twin.” However, as a colleague points out, “no one calls him that anymore. Now he is known only as Doubting Thomas.”¹

Our passage explains that after the other disciples experienced the risen Christ, they told Thomas the mind-blowing news. However, Thomas responded with the words that could be on the lips of every skeptic who has ever lived: Prove it! “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

A week later, the disciples are gathered in the same house again, but this time Thomas is with them. Jesus appeared again and repeated his words from before: “Peace be with you.”

Then, Jesus called Thomas to step forward and said, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” The embarrassed Thomas gets on board quickly.

Then, we hear the words that are intended for us – words that are meant to be heard by every person who has lived after the first century. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Our faith is not always as confident as we wish. No one breezes through life with a firm faith that never wavers. When life is cruel, it is natural for skepticism to surface. When a loved one dies before her time; when famine strikes; when people are oppressed; when bombs obliterate and children are chalked up as collateral damage, doubts may seep into our minds.

When Jesus says, “Peace be with you,” he urges us to have confidence in God. He beckons us to trust God not only when life is trouble free, but also when life is a disaster.

Many people give up on God when life turns sour. They mistakenly believed that their good fortune had been the result of their own faithfulness, and, when life unraveled, they imagined that God had flown the coop or had never been there in the first place.

Sometimes faith is the confident belief that God is our strength in times of trouble, our guide when the way is uncertain and our hope in times of despair. But sometimes faith means to continue to trust God when our confidence is shot and doubts overwhelm. Faith is continuing to pray when we’re not sure God is listening or even there. It is continuing to come to worship when we would rather be enjoying a champagne brunch. It is continuing to embody moral virtues when everyone we know is jettisoning ethics. Faith is gritted teeth determination to keep up the spiritual disciplines of worship, prayer, financial giving, and compassion to others even during a dark night of the soul.

Reflecting on her college days, Sarah Orwig tells of two literature classes that stand out in her memory. One covered stories of utopias. She eagerly anticipated the class. She figured that the assigned books would exemplify excellence and remarkable human accomplishments. However, she discovered that the chief theme woven through those books was one of failure. Woe to anyone who planned the perfect human society or a heaven on earth; they and their social movements would be consumed by treachery, power struggles, and squandering resources.

The second class she recalls was focused on prison literature. It was not her first choice and she faced it with dread. Surely this class would echo the dismal moods of utopian literature: Despair at every turn. Wrong. What emerged from the darkness of the prison stories were reassurances of human endurance

and hope despite the odds; of finding novel ways to communicate; of playing chess inside one's mind; of building mental strength amid physical pain; of retaining one's highest values amid relentless humiliation.

The prison stories spoke of a time *beyond* the present. Everyday heroes stood out because they set sights on a better place, a life free of shackles and constraints. And even if freedom was denied, they stuck to their values nonetheless. Their stories were the epitome of faith.²

Perhaps the writers of those stories understood that resurrection does not come after success; it follows suffering. Resurrection does not come after celebration; it follows crucifixion. The new day dawns after dying and doubt.

Presbyterian pastor Lucinda Isaacs writes: "The purpose of crucifixion is to bury the people who are still alive and to fill them with fear – to silence their resolve for a better world. And it worked...for about three days. Jesus was gone, and the disciples were entombed – barricaded – locked in. All the doors that Jesus had opened in his life and ministry – doors to those who hungered, doors to the excluded, doors to widows and orphans. They were all slammed shut."³

But just as Jesus did not remain entombed, he did not allow the disciples to remain entombed. Jesus breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit," and he said, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Or, as one writer paraphrases: "As God pulled me out of my tomb; I am pulling you out of your tomb."⁴

Resurrection is not merely about life beyond the grave. It is about transformed life before the grave. Resurrection is not only about a future state of affairs. It is about a new quality of life in the present.

Jesus calls on his followers to be resurrection people. That is, as Jesus breathed on the disciples and sent them into the world to carry on his ministry, we are to breathe new life into people who have been presumed dead.

Writer Megan McKenna tells of teaching a class at her church in which the discussion centered on resurrection. She said, "We are the people of resurrection and hope, called to live passionately and compassionately with others, to defy death, to forgive others, to do something that is life-giving, that fights death and needless suffering."

Someone from the back of the class said with a smirk, "Tell us, have you ever brought someone back from the dead?"

She responded, "Yes. Every time I bring hope into a situation, every time I bring joy that shatters despair, every time I forgive others and provide the opportunity for a new future, every time I listen to others and affirm them, every time I speak the truth in public, every time I confront injustice – yes – I bring people back from the dead."⁵

Jesus beckons us to remember who we are. We are Easter people who have been freed from our tombs so that we can help others rise from the dead.

NOTES

1. Barbara Brown Taylor, "Believing Thomas," *Always a Guest*, p. 172.
2. Sarah Forbes Orwig, "We Walk by Faith and Not by Sight," Devotions of Fourth Presbyterian Church, February 21, 2024.
3. Lucinda Perera Isaacs, "A Tale of Two Tombs," *Journal for Preachers: Easter 2024*, p. 42
4. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
5. *Ibid.*