

Easter Living

John 20:19-31

April 7, 2024

You would be hard-pressed to find excitement greater than five-year-old me with a pregnant dog. You see, our golden retriever, Candy, was due to give birth at any time, and I was afloat with happiness. My parents had spent the last nine weeks patiently explaining to me that Candy was going to have puppies, maybe six or seven of them, but we *weren't* going to keep *any* of them. I wasn't happy about that part, but I was fascinated, enchanted by the miracle of life that was happening in my own backyard. And I was determined—determined with the determination of a five year old, I tell you—determined to be there for the big moment and to see those puppies being born.

Well, it happened one day that my mom needed to make a quick trip to the store, and so I decided to go along with her. Nothing unusual about that. But wouldn't you know that we came home, and all the puppies had been born. And I had missed it! I had missed the big event, the thing that I had been waiting for for weeks and for weeks (but the seven puppies in my arms were a pretty good consolation prize, I guess).

It never feels good to miss an important moment. I'm guessing you've been there before: the flight missed, the deadline passed, the wash of regret, the if-onlys, the sinking feeling that comes as reality hits. *I'm too late. I didn't make it. I missed the moment.* Imagine, for just a moment. Remember how that feels, even physically in your body. You know, I almost missed a flight a few weeks ago, and I can still vividly recall the physical sensations—the panic, the elevated blood pressure and heartrate, the stress, the spiral of “what am I going to do if I can't get on this flight?” I was headed to visit my sister and her new baby, and I did make it, just by the skin of my teeth. But it was a stressful couple of hours there.

Imagine preparing for tomorrow's solar eclipse, getting your special glasses, talking about it with your family and friends, planning where you're going to be when the moment comes...and then accidentally sleeping through the alarm for your afternoon nap. I hope that doesn't happen to you!

We don't know what Thomas was doing on that first Easter Day. The text tells us that it was evening. The disciples are gathered, but for some reason Thomas is not with them. Maybe he had to go get his sandals re-soled or go deposit some coins at the bank, or maybe he just needed some fresh air after the events of the last few days. We don't know. But we do know that he was not with the disciples when Jesus came. And then he walks in to the words, “We have seen the Lord.”

Don't you wonder what was going through his mind? “We have seen the Lord.” His friend, his teacher, the one he had sacrificed so much to follow, the one whose death caused bitter disappointment and grief...this Jesus is not only *alive*, but he was *here*? This isn't puppies or a missed flight or even a solar eclipse. Jesus was *here*, and Thomas, poor Thomas, was not.

Whatever went through his mind, we know what Doubting Thomas, as he has come to be known, will say: “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.”

You know, I'm not convinced that “Doubting Thomas” is the right nickname in this scenario. How about Grieving Thomas, Thomas-in-Denial, Angry Thomas, or simply Tardy Thomas. Thomas was late. Wrong place. Wrong time. Now left with the regret, the if-only-I-had-gotten-here-sooner, the sinking feeling of the moment that came and went and is now gone. Perhaps the idea

that it didn't happen at all was less painful than the possibility that it did happen, and he missed it.

There's something comforting, I think, about making Thomas the scapegoat in this story. Doubt is so relatable. Who among us has not wrestled with doubt? Who among us does not prefer the seeable, the explainable, the verifiable, the certain?

But Thomas isn't alone in this story, and I have started to wonder if we are drawn to him because doubt feels more acceptable than the alternative.

The other disciples who were there in that room, like Mary, they have seen Jesus, but something doesn't add up. They have supposedly had this incredible encounter with the Risen Christ who has not only appeared but offered his peace, his breath, the gift of the Holy Spirit. And Jesus has sent them: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." In this remarkable moment, they are no longer disciples (that is, those who follow) but apostles (those who are sent). Jesus has given them the power to forgive sins, to carry on his mission of healing and forgiveness.

It's an incredible encounter, and Thomas missed it. He didn't see Jesus, but what *does* he see? A group of his fellow disciples-turned-apostles on the heels of this supposedly transformative encounter, still gathered in that same room. It's not exactly a compelling witness for resurrection power, and it raises the question: if Thomas is doubting anyone here, is it Jesus, or is it the people who claim to have seen him?

Perhaps this story is less about "Doubting Thomas" and more about "Tardy Thomas and the Unwilling Apostles," or "Grieving Thomas and the Stuck Disciples."

And here's where it starts to get uncomfortable. We can't ignore it: this is us! We are also the recipients of Christ's peace. We, too, have been called not just as those who follow, but those who are sent. We have received the good news of the empty tomb. We celebrated it, whether for the first or the fiftieth time, just last Sunday. We have sung the Hallelujah Chorus. We have declared God's victory over sin and evil.

But do our words and actions align? If Thomas were here with us today, would he believe the story we are telling?

It's easier to make this story about doubting Thomas, isn't it? It's harder to admit that maybe there is some truth to what people have said about the church all along, that the words we speak, the faith we profess, is not always the faith we live.

We say that all people are created in the image of God, but we are so quick to deny that image and to demean others, especially when we disagree with them.

We believe that God has given us abundance to share, and yet we operate out of a place of self-interest and scarcity.

We pray for peace but cling to instruments of war, doing little to work for peace in our community and world.

We say that Jesus is Lord, but we often put more energy and resources into evangelizing for and following modern political leaders whose words and actions don't always reflect the commitments of our faith.

We believe that God is love, but we are quick to impose conditions and boundaries on that love.

We insist that our faith comes first...except for when we need to be practical and sensible. Except for when we need to live in the real world.

We say that we are committed to following Christ, but we keep going back to those rooms of safety and familiarity and comfort.

Now, if all of this sounds incredibly bleak, there is grace here, too, for we know, and we give thanks, that the integrity of the gospel has never and will never rest on our faithfulness, but on God's. It is because God is faithful that God continues to pursue us, even behind locked doors, continually calling us into a different future.

Speaking of that room, those closed doors. To put an even finer point on things, the text tells us that a whole week later, the disciples are still shut away in that same room. Thomas is there this time.

And Jesus comes again and offers himself. There is no "gotcha" here. No "if only you had believed, Thomas." There is no condemnation for the disciples, still sequestered away in that room. There is only Jesus, again, offering his peace and patiently answering all of Thomas' demands. "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."

Yes, Jesus comes to Thomas in his grief. The grace of a second chance, a moment not missed or denied.

Jesus comes to those unwilling apostles, those stuck disciples, a second time.

And Jesus comes to us, however unwilling or stuck we may be, to lead us once more from Easter believing to Easter living.

I find a lot of hope remembering that in the Church, Easter isn't just one day. Technically, every Sunday is a little Easter. I love this because it reminds me and reminds us that Easter and resurrection are a process. Easter marks not just a singular victory, something accomplished and done, but a beginning of a new way of life in a world where death has been overcome and our Risen Lord promises to meet us: in the locked rooms of our hearts, in the old habits, the debilitating diagnosis, in the entrenched beliefs, in the fortress of grief, in the mire of our habits and expectations. Jesus promises to come to us, to find us there, and to invite us, again and again, into Easter living.

Easter is a process, and each one of us is a mix of fickle and faithful, depending on the day, depending on the moment. I know that's true of me. We are stuck and stagnant more than we'd like to admit, but Jesus continues to show up anyway and to send us out. And sometimes, we listen. Sometimes, we get it right. That's one of the gifts of life in community: we have others to help show us the way, to show us what it looks like to get it right, to help pick us up when we're the ones who are stuck and need to be reminded and sent out again.

When I feel most stuck, I think of one of you who had a major surgery that kept you isolated at home

for months, unable to work or drive. This person felt called to serve in some way and so reached out about joining our prayer ministry and began a practice of faithfully praying for the needs of our congregation and community from home each week.

When I feel stuck, I think of one of you who was coming up on retirement. When I asked this person what they were most looking forward to, I expected to hear about exciting travel plans and new hobbies, but they quickly answered that they were looking forward to spending more time serving in the food pantry. This was years ago, and that person continues to be one of our most active volunteers.

When I feel stuck, I think of one of our youth who, as part of her birthday party festivities, asked her friends to gather together and work together writing notes of encouragement and prayer to those who were going through illness or a hard time. I didn't know about any of this until after the fact, when she brought me a stack of these handwritten notes to be shared with any of our members who might need a reminder that they are loved and being prayed for.

Friends, the story that these apostles are living is a story that can be believed. And we know that when we inevitably fall short, when we retreat to those familiar rooms and patterns, we can trust that Christ will come to us once more, and once more, and once more after that, with the peace that meets us where we are and sends us out again.

Thanks be to God. Amen.