

The God Resurrection Reveals (John 20:19-31)

Today finds us starting the second week of Eastertide—a period of 7 weeks in the church calendar where the selected scripture passages describe resurrection appearances of Jesus or the meaning behind it. The passage Pastor Andrea read for us is a familiar one to most who are acquainted with the story of Jesus. Typically the focus in this story tends to be the disciple we've come to know as "doubting Thomas" though Jesus never calls him this. A close reading of the original language of the text leans more in the direction of Jesus saying to him: stop persisting in unbelief, and believe. What we discover in this is that Thomas was simply a week behind the others—they were in the same place a week before.

Because we believe in the existence of God, and, as Paul refers to it in Acts 26, we do not find the idea of God raising the dead as incredible, I think we sometimes fail to appreciate just how difficult it was for the original disciples themselves to grasp the reality of Jesus' resurrection. We stand in a long tradition and history of belief in the resurrection, but they did not. Though they clearly believed in God and understood Jesus to be someone through whom the power of God worked in a remarkable way, even marking him as the Messiah of Israel, the idea of resurrection was not a common fixture in their faith. They held a sense of a common resurrection of everyone at the end of time for the purpose of judgement, but an individual resurrection prior to this wasn't in their wheelhouse. Which is why they tended to be confused when Jesus had spoken of his rising from the dead—they didn't really know what to make of that. Earlier in this chapter, John emphasized this as the disciples pondered the meaning of the empty tomb. In vs. 9 he said of the disciples: "they still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead."

When the disciples gathered together in the evening of that resurrection Sunday, they met behind locked doors for fear of the Jewish leaders. Perhaps they had met to ponder what was to become of them. They may have wondered: What kind of a world do we live in now that Jesus is no longer part of it? Given the rapidity, ferocity, and effectiveness of the Jewish leaders plan to eliminate Jesus, how soon might it catch up to them? They had seen how quickly public sentiment turned against Jesus—they could very well be deemed guilty by association and soon trotted up the road to Golgotha.

And then, as they were pondering a grim future, Jesus came and stood among them, saying "peace be with you." John's account is highly compressed—we have to read between the lines to gain the full effect, and it would seem that peace wasn't their first reaction. Remembering that the disciples were persons just like us with the same range of emotions we have, the same apprehensions we possess, I think it safe to say they were likely startled to put it mildly—perhaps they were something closer to terrified. Jesus had to assure them that it was truly himself—the indications from other accounts imply that there was a qualitative difference in his appearance; he wasn't immediately recognized even by those who knew him best. And since their most recent memory of him was as a battered, bloodied, broken man dead on the cross, to see him vibrant and alive would have been astonishing to say the least. The evidence of the wounds still present in his hands and side convince them of his identity, and they were overjoyed. Jesus, in effect, says let's start over: peace be with you, only now it really took hold.

As we know from the passage, the disciple Thomas wasn't with them when this happened. The other disciples told him that they had seen the Lord, but he's not having any of it. He'd been disappointed before, he wasn't going to set himself for another round of that. Unless he verifies for himself that the one they saw was the crucified Jesus, he won't believe. And we know the outcome—a week later, same circumstances, locked doors, and Jesus shows up offering Thomas what the others had already received—here are my wounds, see for yourself and believe.

So what do we make of this in our day?

There's actually a wealth of material here for us to explore—time constraints don't permit us to cover all of it. John's audience and purpose in writing provides initial direction: he wrote to and for the church to confirm the foundational basis for our belief, our trust in Jesus. His original audience would likely not have witnessed these events first hand. They, like us,

can't verify the identity of the risen Lord for themselves. But in John's record, we have Christ's word that blessing comes not simply by witness, but through trust in the testimony preserved for us. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." John tells us that much more happened in the ministry of Jesus, but what is written is sufficient evidence to generate belief—trust—that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that by believing, by trusting him, you may have life in his name.

Thomas' declaration of faith in the presence of Christ: my Lord and my God, is the strongest attestation of Christ's deity, particularly for the fact that Jesus doesn't correct or rebuke him for it. Throughout the biblical record, people who venerate persons or even angels as God were immediately rebuked for their misdirected worship. That Jesus doesn't affirm the truth of Thomas' statement.

There's much more we could consider, but I want to lead your thought in our remaining time on the presence of woundedness in the resurrected person of Jesus. To me, this seems counter-intuitive to our understanding of a glorified state. In Jesus' own public ministry, the persons he healed did not bear the marks of their infirmity in their healing. The blind didn't just kind of see, the lame didn't limp, and the lepers spots vanished. Those healed were made whole again, so one might reasonably expect that, in resurrection, the wounds Jesus received would have vanished as well. But they didn't—exactly how they appeared isn't clear, but that they were present and recognizable for what they were is.

On the face of it—especially in this passage—we see that they provided confirming evidence that the Jesus who appeared to his followers was the same Jesus who had been crucified. Fair enough, but is that it? What if there is more to it?

John's gospel begins with a powerful description of the Word, who was with God in the beginning, and who is God. And then he wrote, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." Just a few lines later John wrote, "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known." The Word made flesh has made God known. In the Word, God is inextricably united with the flesh of human existence. And flesh means wounds.

The resurrection of Jesus defined a new era of reality for the world. Resurrection is God's work and it means that God is not done with the restoration of creation and humankind within it. The real work of restoration began in earnest with Christ's resurrection demonstrating the reality of life beyond what the world had settled for. But amid the new possibilities for life came a new understanding of God that defied the convention of a distant being untouched and unfazed by the adversity of human existence who waits only to pass judgement on its rebellion. Instead, the resurrected Jesus reveals a God who bears the wounds of the world's suffering as the evidence of God's great love for us. You can trust a wounded God, for this kind of God knows your pain, this kind of God knows how you suffer, this kind of God knows your experience first hand. Woundedness is part of the human condition—a wounded God empathizes with your situation and demonstrates in the resurrected Christ that wounds are not what defines you—they are not the end of the story. The life and love of God revealed in Jesus is what defines you, and in the energy and presence of Christ by his Spirit, your wounds will not overcome you. For the wounded God suffers with you and will carry you beyond your wound into peace.

The resurrection marked the beginning of a new era for the world. And the life of Jesus alive in those who follow him marks the creation of a new humanity in the world. By his Spirit dwelling within, we take on the mantle of wounded healers, who bear scars of adversity and pain, but also as those who bear the stamp of Christ's glory. Despite our woundedness, the character of Christ shows up bearing witness to the sensibility of living in Christ, for by faith we are enabled to approach the world in love, empathizing with the pain it bears, standing in solidarity with those who suffer its inequity and injustice knowing there is a way to rise above fear and insecurity if we will pursue it. Wounded healers become reliable guides for a different approach to life, not because we have it all figured out, but for the fact that we know the One who does. Let your life bear witness to that resurrected Jesus. AMEN