

2nd Sunday of Eastertide
Sermon 4.19.20

1 Peter 1:3-9

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,⁴ and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you,⁵ who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.⁶ In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials,⁷ so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.⁸ Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy,⁹ for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the [religious authorities], Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "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."²⁶ A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.³¹ But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. (528)

I listen to a lot of podcasts. *On the Media* is one that's been on my listening list for the longest. An NPR production, it delves into all things media. Its scope has become broader over the years as all things media have become nearly all things. Almost everything in life is mediated, it would seem, life nearly always coming to us through some less-than-immediate means, so almost everything in life falls within the scope of this show.

One of their short programs this week was on “Virtual Worship,” which, the subtitle suggested, is older than you think, though it’s also something people of faith might be loath to embrace. The host, Bob Garfield, interviewed a religious studies professor who teaches at the University of Colorado, Boulder, Samuel Boyd. He explained that all three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, feature strong injunctions to gather for worship. Whether on pilgrimage, for prayer, or for a weekly ceremonial dinner, all three assume as bedrock some regular, physical, embodied gathering of the faithful.

They also have this in common: amidst this time of pandemic, they’re celebrating a high holiday in their tradition. It is the season of the Passover for Jews, Holy Week and Easter for Christians, and Ramadan for Islam. And each features some communal way of honoring these, whether the Passover Seder, Easter worship, or Ramadan’s fasting and then breaking the fast. Yet there is also now this injunction: to shelter in place, to practice social distancing which might better be called physical distancing while finding ways to be socially close. So, to find those ways—and for people who honor tradition, a tradition of *gathering*. It’s a puzzle.

The journalist and the scholar gave us a good hearing—us folks who practice a faith. We don’t always come across well in contexts like this, on public radio as the topic for a scholar and a journalist to discuss. But we did on that show. Clearly, we were interesting specimens for study, and it was respectful study.

Their analysis, though, as regards these ancient injunctions to gather: it all seemed a little bloodless.

They turned to our various holy books and considered what each indicated—that God had told us to gather, had told the Jews to have Sabbath dinners or had told the Christians to gather and break bread. But the assumption that we do such things because certain books claim that God declared that we should seems to miss a more compelling truth: that something happens when we gather with other people in a certain place, that something *happens* when we present ourselves embodied to other people who are also present in body—and this is perhaps why God seems to have ordained such gatherings for holy purposes in the first place. To encourage us to pursue that mysterious occurrence of mutual actual presence; to ordain our seeking out the taking place of actual encounter between people who present themselves in body and spirit: this is surely why God

is felt to call God's various people to their various gatherings: because we *sense* the presence of God in the presence of one another.

That's why I do it: I go to church not because it says somewhere in the Bible that I should (it doesn't), but because there, in gathering with a people in hope of God's presence, God becomes present. Plus, it's the one place (houses of worship) in our society where anyone can come in, and anyone just might. When we of the church open our doors for public worship, we take all comers, anyone might join in.

Take a moment to think about that. Where else does that happen? Where else in society does it happen that you can enter a place that is not yours and you can take a place, without money, without a membership card, without social connections—and still more astonishingly it's a beautiful place that's been cared for across time, curated to contain objects that each and all aim to be some vessel of the divine?

And there, in church, as a child, I knew lots of old people. And there as a youth I knew lots of would-be mentors, call them saints. And there as a middle-aged person I know a few children. And I hope as an old person I might have the not-infrequent chance to hold someone else's baby. Where else in our busy, mono-generational, virtual, individualistic society do things as basic and profound as these take place? Where else but in church, in houses and congregations of faith?

See, these two very smart people, Mistery Garfield and Boyd: they got the cause and the effect mixed up. They thought it to be the case that the book tells us what to do, so we do it. But I suspect it's actually the case that people from time immemorial have done this (gathered in the hope of actual encounter) and found that something holy happens in that encounter, and then understood that to be as the call of God to ordain such practice, which they then wrote down in sacred texts so to carry on the tradition and encourage that hope.

Meanwhile, the scholar and the journalist, respectful as they seemed willing to be (and thanks to them for that) totally missed the possibility that these people of God might be on to something—that something powerful takes place when people gather in a place, and open their hearts to one another, and let their minds wander and imaginations wonder, and enact some embodied practice, whether singing together or eating a shared meal or reciting words of love and

compassion and community and hope. Something of mystery arises between and among people when they are present to one another.

That's why we gather: because we remember this, and we hope for this, and so we make ourselves present to this.

When we were all deep into week two of sheltering in place, which had felt like a long time at the time, but was actually, apparently, just the beginning, I had a thought—that what I missed most about my life was the *texture* of it, that now it was all just *text*. Email, texting, more email, a post on Facebook, a reply on Twitter, more email: it was all text, there was little of texture.

And isn't it a wonder how nothing has been more conducive of conflict in recent time than the rise of "social media." Turns out connecting the whole world but via text only connects people just enough to make us hate, misunderstand, and fight each other. Turns out what makes for communication, in contrast to mere connection, is something of the mystery of the flesh—the softness of the body, the nuance of the face, the tone of the voice and urgent reality of someone else's eyes and their gaze, the subtlety and peculiarity of gesture; the bitten nails, the pinked cheeks, the chapped lips, the nicked-from-shaving chin, the clinging scent of the cold outdoors; our amazing capacity to take it all in, to interpret and respond to more information than another puts off than any of us could possibly be conscious of. We are always reading one another, and we are surprisingly often correct in our reading because in our presence to one another there's a soft but firm foundation of generosity, grace, mutual vulnerability. We are always reading one another, and we are surprisingly often correct in our reading, because we're reading texture, not just text.

The mystery and power of mutual presence is the quality being explored in the Resurrection of Christ and its many ways of being told, which are though also consistent. Really, there's a striking consistence across all the many accounts of this skittering, surprising, sudden presence of the risen Christ—here in an upper room, there on the road to Emmaus, a while hence on the road to Damascus, once on a beach making breakfast. There's a striking insistence in all these varied accounts—from the earliest in Paul's letters to this late one in John's gospel—that Jesus Resurrected appeared to the people physically, embodied, while also changed, as in the twinkling of an eye. He is recognized and unrecognized, recognizable and totally other.

Take this account, for example, which might be familiar to you because we hear it in church on the Sunday after Easter every year. This is one of those stories that we hear not just

every three years, as we cycle through the three-year lectionary, but every year, and always on this Sunday. And why, but because this is the last of the stories of the gospels that keeps us in real time with Jesus. Beginning with Palm Sunday, when Jesus is remembered to have entered Jerusalem five days before his arrest, and then continuing with Maundy Thursday when the last supper and then the arrest took place, we can follow him through our own week, though remembering it as Holy Week, time out of normal time. We go with him into Good Friday when the crucifixion took place, into Holy Saturday when the world rested if not in peace than at least in stillness, held breath. We of the Church travel with Jesus in real time right on into Easter Sunday, Resurrection Day, the eighth day of the gospel narratives, though also the first day and the inbreaking of eternal day.

And when it was evening on that day, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of all that was going on beyond them—the festival of the Passover overcome, at least for some, with a trial and an execution, which was not how the festival should rightly be celebrated, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.”

While the city roils, and death hangs in the air, and menace spreads apace: “Peace be with you.”

This is staggering for a number of reasons.

First, there is the fact that, though he was dead and buried, facts which all gathered here had plainly seen, here he was, alive.

How he was alive was also staggering—the manner of it, staggering!—for he entered a room that was sealed and locked, as in how ghosts are imagined in popular imagination to move, yet he entered it in a state that was to be sensed by all there, sensed in their seeing and hearing, and in their feeling—his breath on their faces, his life as held in breath offered as Spirit unto them. This is to say he was both embodied but not quite, embodied but not in the same way that any of us are now embodied. He was the same and he was utterly different. There was continuity with his life in the world, and there was transformation from his life in the world.

Third, there was his apparent reason for coming, implied in the first and therefore most urgent thing we had to say, not this (as I say every year), “I’m back, I’m pissed, and we’re going to get the guys who did this to me,” but this, “Peace be with you.” Though the disciples were locked away in fear, and though they might well have had real reason to be afraid—the forces that had

spurred crucifixion still perhaps on the loose, some officials maybe even yet patrolling and prowling for those who'd followed Jesus, searching for them in case that one execution didn't do the trick of tamping his whole movement down—Jesus came to these whose lives might very well have been at risk and who might very well have amped themselves up for a fight if for nothing else than for self-defense, survival at any cost, and he said this, “Peace be with you,” and then he breathed on them the Holy Spirit that it might be so, “Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I send you.”

Don't forget this. Don't forget, in your familiarity with the story, and in your familiarity with Jesus (Jesus, who's been represented to us and for us and by us in modes that span from classy to cheesy, from elevating to embarrassing—from story to spectacle, from art to kitsch, from the requiem mass to church camp songs [which I love, by the way], from icon to dashboard bobble head) that his return to us is unlike what you'd find in any other commonly told hero-story or widely known myth. Don't forget that amidst all this familiar and casual re-presentation of him, his true presentation is utterly shocking: killed and risen and now returned to his friends who might take this opportunity for revenge, he says this, “Peace be with you.”

Seek that presentation out wherever you can. Amidst representation and replication, seek out the presentation of Jesus, which always comes to us amidst conflict and potential violence: “Peace be with you.” The one who puts conflict to rest by taking in its last gasp and breathing it back out: “Peace.” The one who forces violence to calm and by the force of taking in its last acting out to respond in kind: “Peace.” Seek that one out, for there is Christ present. Be that one, and in you is Christ present.

This is why we continue to tell the story, by the way—the story of the yet present always risen Christ. This is why there is the church. It's so “against” the way of the world, though it is “against” in such a way that invites or implies or suggests a dumbfounding lack of violence—none at all.

This is why we continue to walk with Jesus—and through these days when we can walk with him in real time, as today, a week later, when the disciples were again in the house, but this time Thomas was with them. He had been out, that day from the week earlier, but now he was in and by his witness we get to the final reason why this is staggering, the risen return of Jesus killed and now alive.

This is it, that the crucified one is the risen one, that the crucified one is the beloved anointed of God. This is surely why Thomas, having missed it before, wanted now to see Jesus, and not specifically him resurrected in body but to see his wounds, his mortal wounds. Did you notice, upon Thomas' return, when the disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord," Thomas responded not with doubt that Jesus had returned from death alive, but with a stated need to see the wounds: "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"? Did you notice this? See, it's as if Thomas didn't doubt the resurrection of someone once dead and now alive, but doubted the resurrection of someone crucified. What proof he needed wasn't to see Christ Risen but to see the Risen Christ's mortal wounds, which implies what he "doubted," to the degree that he doubted anything, wasn't the resurrection per se but the resurrection of someone crucified—for how can it be that one crucified is one so beloved?

Isn't suffering a sign of God's disfavor?

Isn't bad fortune the sign of God's judgment, the sign of God's contempt and withdrawal?

So how can it be that one so accursed as to be made to hang from a tree is also the one so beloved as to be the first born of the dead?

My professor of the Jewish Liturgical Year in divinity school, himself an Orthodox Jew, said it well: as a believer in the (Hebrew) biblical claims of the power of God, he assured his students that he believed in the power of God to resurrect life from the dead, which is something you see in the Hebrew Bible as in the Christian testament. He just didn't believe that God would do this first, singularly, and most revealingly with Jesus, he who was a violation of the Law, he who was an outlaw, not the law's fulfillment.

I appreciated him saying it so plainly, laying so bare the difference between his confession and mine. I also appreciated his bringing to light what is so peculiar about the Christian confession and what it implies about what we witness as far as God at work in the world. The crucified one is the resurrected one. The one cursed in the world, the one made to suffer and to take punishment though undeservedly so, is the anointed one of God. The one from whom the world would recoil in horror and disgust is the one whom God so loves, whom God seeks most closely to embrace.

This is what Thomas doubted, to the degree that he doubted anything. This, which is the central claim that this gospel would have us believe. The Gospel of John is obsessed with bearing such witness that we might believe. Everywhere you look in this book is the urging that we believe. Jesus did such-and-that that all might believe. Jesus said so-and-so that all hearing it might believe. As to what we're to believe, it's not so explicit. It is, however, well implied—and this is it, this is what we're to believe: that the crucified one is the risen one, that God's favor rests on the one whose suffering doesn't spur vengeance but urges peace, that God comes not in might but in self-giving, and moreover God blesses most especially all acts committed in self-giving and all lives lived enacting self-emptying.

This is what Thomas doubted, to the degree that he doubted anything (“Unless I see the wounds...”) and this is what Jesus would have him believe: the wounded one is the risen one, the broken one is the beloved one of God, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit so to bring others to such heroic acts of self-giving love.

And he could only believe it if Jesus appeared among them embodied. This isn't something transmitted through text, though our gospel writer certainly gives it his best effort, claiming even special blessing for those who haven't seen, have only read, and yet have come to believe. It is something, rather, truly communicated through embodiment, presentation to the point of presence—which is why the church, which is why congregations such as ours, a living embodiment of the aim of self-giving, a living sacrifice committed in love of neighbor and stranger alike.

Our sorrowing these days is manifold, I imagine. But at the foundation of it all might well be this: that what presence we seek has largely been reduced to re-presence, what texture once to have brought us joy and fulfillment has largely been reduced to text, a disembodiment of life that though yet echoes of life.

The radical reassurances testified to at Easter arrive in our inbox a bit drained of vitality.

But let that absence be testimony to its presence.

Let what is lacking in our lives these days be foretaste of their coming return.

Christ in the gospels is as often felt as yet coming or as having gone ahead as he is felt to be fully here. This is the negative capability that Christ inspires—a dynamic of living faith rather than a fixed certainty well-reasoned. Resurrection has perhaps always implied fulfillment, promised even consummation. This year, though, I suppose, that fulfillment feels a little faded, that completion

feels evermore to be in the coming. This year we are perhaps more aware of our state of faithful waiting.

Bless our waiting, then, for in this too is Christ.

Thanks be to God.