

Trust is the Heart of the Matter

Acts 4: 32-35; John 20: 19-31

Second Sunday of Easter, (April 11) 2021

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Over the past year, I've been inspired and amazed every week as I read the appointed scripture from the lectionary. Every week it seems as if scripture has been written for "such a time as this." Every Sunday, it is as if the ancient words from our holy book, were written with today's headlines in mind, while also speaking to our hearts. Perhaps none more than the reading this morning from John that is read every year on the Second Sunday of Easter: "and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear..." (John 20:19).

If that does not describe where most of have lived this year, I don't know what does. The disciples were locked down – locked down, locked in, and locked out – all because of fear. Even though our story begins on Easter Sunday night, and even though these disciples have heard the witness of the women from earlier in the morning that Jesus has been resurrected, and some of them have even seen the Resurrected Jesus, they are still afraid. They've locked the doors, barred the windows, turned out the lights, and are silent, in fear of alerting anyone outside that they are there. Roman troops might burst into the room at any moment, spotlights, loudspeakers, helicopters overhead, maybe guns blazing. In fear, the disciples lock themselves in and sit still in the silent, stifling air of the closed-in room, where the only noise is made by the drops of sweat hitting the floor.

A little further into the story, John tells us that one of the disciples, Thomas, was not there with the others on that first Easter night. For one reason or another, he was isolated from the community. He was disconnected, dis-membered. And in the New Testament, being separated from the community of faith makes all the difference. Resurrection faith and all that is associated with it – grace, love, and hope – is inseparable from the community, from relationship. And without embodied relationship, faith and hope and grace become thin and dissipate into nothing. Thomas is separated and therefore, the news of the resurrection does not make any sense to him.

Does this story resonate? Does this sound real to you? Locked down from fear and disconnected from one another. Wow. What else could happen?

Well, let me tell you what else could happen. John says, it was night. It was evening (v. 19). And you've heard me say before that night, evening, the darkness in John is never simply about the time of day. It is always about the spiritual nature of what's going on. When it is dark or night in John, it means that hope is dim or nonexistent; it means that evil and sin threaten to overwhelm. It means that things are threatening to go off the rails.

So, they are locked down because of fear. Thomas is disconnected. And darkness surrounds them. Darkness is even in them.

Think of it this way. We identify with much of this story from our context of this year and our fear and lock down because of COVID-19. To use the

terminology of biology and medicine, we lock down or quarantine to protect ourselves and our neighbors from a pathogen. A pathogen is usually defined as a microorganism that causes a disease. By its very nature a pathogen is invasive. It comes to us from outside of us, so we do certain things to protect against it: we wear masks and wash our hands, we lock down in quarantine, and so on. But this morning think of pathogenic invasiveness as more than biology. Think of it as anything that invades and intrudes, anything that violates our space or the space of others threatening dignity, and threatening well-being: viruses, violence and guns, toxicity, demagogues, sexual predators, bullies, name-calling blamers, and on and on. We can lock the doors and bar the windows; we can build walls; we can isolate ourselves and hunker down but the kind of pathogen I'm talking about respects no boundaries.

Think of countless movie scenes we've watched, perhaps from *Harry Potter* or *Lord of the Rings*, and picture a toxic fog or dark mist slowly but relentlessly creeping along the ground and in the air, its tendrils reaching out and overwhelming everything in its path, and everything it touches collapses and is incapacitated. We run inside and lock the doors but soon the dark fog is slithering beneath the door. It touches everything, nothing and no one is immune from the spreading darkness, the invading pathogen.

Well, now we're getting a better picture of the disciples locked down behind closed doors because of fear. It is night and the darkness is not just outside the doors; it is spreading inside the room and inside of them.

I know, for example, that holocaust scholars have learned to be aware of what reading account after account of Jewish extermination camps, of death and violence and brutality, over and over does to the scholars' hearts and minds and spirits. The holocaust gets inside of them.

Philip Hallie, wrote the book *Let Innocent Blood Be Shed*, about the French village of Le Chambon which saved so many Jewish lives. Early in the book he wrote, "For years I had been studying the slow crushing and grinding of a human being by other human beings... so that when I was not bitterly angry, I was bored at the repetition of the pattern of persecution. When I was not desiring to be cruel with the cruel, I was a monster – like, perhaps many others around me – who could look upon torture and death without a shudder" (p. 2).

In other words, trauma and violence and brutality gets inside of us, invades us, not only if it happens to us, but also if we witness it. More, the pathogen of darkness and evil gets inside of us even if we are exposed to it over and over by reading or hearing about it from others. To use biblical images I've learned from the black church, one of the reasons the children of Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty years is the same reason Moses spent forty years in Midian as a shepherd. It was not only that they had to get out of Egypt, but it was also that Egypt had to get out of them. Slavery and brutality were outside of them but had also become inside of them, part of them.

Locked down from fear, social isolation, and pervasive and invasive darkness – no wonder Thomas has doubts. Perhaps some of his doubt is that this

resurrection stuff about Jesus simply does not make sense to him; it is illogical. But I think much of it is psychic and spiritual overload. He can't take anymore. His system is overwhelmed and there is no more room to take in any more information, especially life-changing information. Doubt, mistrust, and skepticism are not just intellectual or rational. Perhaps these days, we simply cannot trust anything because we can't take it in.

Maybe that's why we live in a time with such a crisis of trust. We have a difficult time trusting anyone but ourselves and, on some days, we aren't sure about ourselves.

Thomas is nicknamed "Didymus," which is Greek for "twin." Literally, his name means "double," and some scholars think it refers to Thomas being double minded about everything. Another way to put it, is that he was always asking questions. He's careful; maybe even skeptical. He wants to see what's "on this hand" as well as what's "on the other hand." Thomas' skepticism might come from trying to keep everything at a distance. When we've been burned over and over, we're careful. We doubt. We don't trust.

I don't think Thomas is just a contrarian, you know, one of those annoying people whose default habit is always to disagree. No, Thomas, I think that Thomas, for a variety of reasons has come to the place where he says, "I've been naïve and taken in and had my heart ripped out too many times. I'm not trusting anyone or anything anymore. I'm sure not trusting you guys."

Truth is, given what we know about the disciples, who can blame him? On top of it all he is grieving and in shock, and he's isolated and excluded. For all these reasons, that first Easter evening Thomas was not there. Of course, in Thomas's case, he missed the resurrected Lord by isolating himself.

The next week, Thomas is there in the locked room with the other disciples. But get this and this is important. The Resurrected Christ invades this locked down room. Even though the disciples are locked down, locked out, and locked in because of fear. Even though darkness is invading from outside them and entering inside them, the Living Christ enters into where they are. It is nothing they do or not do. It has nothing to do with their own efforts. This has nothing to do with them working harder and longer and better until they work it out. The Living Christ comes to them outside of themselves. We call it grace.

So, remember this. Remember that even though we have been isolated and locked down, afraid and overwhelmed by darkness, the Living God, the Light of the World overcomes the darkness. When we are in despair and cynicism, it is not enough to keep out the Resurrection. The Living Christ comes to us even when we're locked down in fear.

The resurrected Jesus shows Thomas, show us his wounds. Scripture says that by "his stripes we are healed," or "by his wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5). Part of learning to trust again has to do with our wounds being healed by the wounds of Jesus. And Jesus shows us how this happens. He shares his wounds with his disciples. Sisters and brothers, healing trust comes when we are able to

share our wounds with one another in the spirit and presence of Christ. When we share mutual compassion and expose our deep hurts to one another we'll know the wounded and resurrected Christ among us. I'm not talking about everyone parading around every private hurt we have. But I am talking about learning to trust one another, most likely one or two or three others, so that from time to time, quietly and prayerfully we can be real about our wounds – where we hurt, where we're afraid, where we doubt. It comes down to trust. Trust is the heart of the matter. Do we trust God and do we trust one another?

As followers of this wounded and resurrected Jesus, we are called to trust him. But believing and trusting – and I'm using those two terms interchangeably – does not mean we must accept twenty-three improbable propositions before breakfast. It does not mean that we just make up our minds to think differently.

It does mean that we are to become participants in the Way of the Living Jesus

Notice what happened with Thomas. Jesus walks through the door and pronounces "Peace be with you." This is not Jesus saying, "Hello." It is Jesus bringing the peace of the Holy Spirit. It says the week before that when he announced peace, he breathed upon them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." And even though Jesus offers his wounded body for Thomas to touch, we have no indication that Thomas did so. What Thomas did was confess, "My Lord and my God!" Because of the peace and presence of the Holy Spirit, Thomas is able to believe. Believing and trusting is a leap of faith that is made possible by the

healing presence of the Spirit. Once we confess that Christ is our Lord and our God, once we commit to follow Jesus Christ and become participants in his Way, we begin to see more and more of who he is. We don't get the evidence first and then act on it. The Living Christ shows up unbidden and brings us hope through the Holy Spirit. And we lean into the hope and trust that God brings. We learn by living into it.

Trust is the heart of the matter. The Acts scripture given to us today is a picture of the early church, trusting the Crucified and Resurrected Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, living in extraordinary trust with one another. They were sharing their possessions, and were of one heart and soul, which means they were sharing their wounds and their lives with one another. Here in the middle of our crisis of trust is this vivid picture of trust. This is who we are to be.

Julian of Norwich, the great female English theologian, mystic, and writer of the 14th century, endured the pandemic which historians call the Black Death, and which killed half of the population of her city. She lived during the climate change called the Little Ice Age, which resulted in widespread social upheaval and hunger and disease. She endured sickness and was near death several times in her own life. She endured the Peasant's War and ongoing violence around her and witnessed an insurrection. She lived in isolation, in a small cell or room attached to the outside wall of the cathedral in Norwich, with a small window through which she could view the worship of the church. As Jane has written, might it have been like viewing worship on a computer screen?

Yet even while looking at the world outside of her, battling the disease inside of her, she looked to the Living Christ and wrote famously, “But all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” A little further she wrote my favorite lines, and I love this. She said, the Living Christ did not say, “Thou shalt not be tempested, thou shalt not be travailed, thou shalt not be dis-eased; but he said, ‘Thou shalt not be overcome.’”

Can you live into that? I can live into it. Thanks be to God!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.