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John 20:19-31

Resurrection Stories

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John 20:19-31 NRSV

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 Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” But Thomas (who was called the Twin, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 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.” 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.” 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.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” 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.” Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 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.

I love this story so much. I love it because the disciples are afraid, huddled behind closed doors. We think that they should be bold and empowered, and they are hiding behind closed doors. And Jesus shows up. Jesus gives the disciples his peace, he commissions them to share in his ministry, and he empowers them with the gift of the Holy Spirit. But Thomas was not there. And when the disciples tell Thomas they have seen Jesus, that he is alive, he does not believe them.

We make a big deal out of doubting Thomas, but a week after the other disciples had encountered the risen Christ and received Jesus’ peace and the Holy Spirit, they were once again hiding behind closed doors in the house, but this time Thomas was with them.

The other disciples were not living as Easter people. They were still not sure how to move forward. So, yes, Jesus comes to Thomas, but he also comes to the other disciples who are still scared and confused. Thomas receives what he had requested, he is able to see Jesus for himself, but Jesus also offers himself again to the other disciples. Jesus offers himself, again and again, over and over, to people who long to see him. And Jesus gives the repeated gift of his presence and his peace.

Are we back behind closed doors? Last week on Easter we might have felt great. All of our worry, concern and doubt, we had given it all to Jesus, and now we have taken it all back again. Has anyone else had a hard week? I spoke with someone this week who has been visiting our church and is trapped in addiction and is feeling hopeless. I talked with a young adult this week who is struggling because the parents want to ignore their child’s sexuality. Because if they don’t say the words, then it is not true, I guess? Anyone else struggling this week? Had conflict with a friend, or felt hopeless or lost or alone? Or watched the video of Walter Scott’s death and just felt like the world was never going to get better?

This story resonated for me because I would be right there with the disciples hiding behind closed doors surrounded by all my friends. I would be right there with the disciples terrified. Thomas and the other disciples wanted more, needed more, demanded more. And Jesus met them where they were. Jesus did not lecture, Jesus did not get angry, Jesus did not say, why are you hiding behind closed doors? Why aren’t you sharing the good news? Jesus met them. This is a story of grace. A story of grace for those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.

On Easter Sunday one of our church members, Abigail Hazlett wrote this on facebook, “If you are to believe the gospels, every single thing Jesus did was about challenging empire, subverting the power structure, rejecting the hierarchy of value, stripping the power from those who meant to control and dominate. And that, whatever you believe, is awesome.” It is hard to live as Jesus’ disciple, back then and today. Jesus was constantly asking his disciples to question the ways they had always lived their lives, encouraging them to take risks and to stir the societal pot. Jesus was about mercy and compassion, lifting up the weakest and most defenseless people, welcoming the stranger and loving your enemies abroad. Being a disciple could sometimes be exhausting.

If we hide from Jesus, we can pretend that we can go back to the way things were before we had seen the world through Jesus’ eyes. We can pretend to go back to life as usual where everybody is on their own. Where you hope you were born on the right side of the tracks and that you know the right people, and that you can pull your own self up. But God is not done with any of us yet and God is not done with this world yet.

In Maryland there is an elementary school called Seat Pleasant Elementary. Back in 1988 2 philanthropists adopted an entire class of 59 5th graders from that school that was in one of the poorest neighborhoods in the state. Those 5th graders and their families were told when they were ready for college, the money would be there for their tuition at the University of Maryland. Many of the parents felt like their children had just received a miracle, and the gift of a college education was seen as a symbol of hope to these families. But the amazing thing is that the two philanthropists didn’t just swoop in and say good luck see you in 7 more years, they hired someone to help keep the kids on track for college, someone to be their eyes and ears in the lives of the students at school and at home. The philanthropists hired a mentor to this class of 5th graders. The mentor, Tracy Proctor, was 24 and had no experience working with children. But he understood the kids’ experiences and spoke their language. He had grown up as one of 8 siblings raised by a single mother in a series of housing complexes in Washington D.C. By the time he was 12, he had attended 6 elementary schools and he went on to graduate from Howard University on a baseball scholarship.

The mentor had visited each of the 59 5th grade children in their homes, and he knew when one of their father’s was murdered, he knew when one of the kids failed a test. Tracy Proctor said at 24 he realized he was a surrogate father, social worker, fixer, tutor, bouncer, parole officer and chauffeur. And it was his job to mentor these 59 kids and try to ensure their success. As the kids went to junior high and high school, Proctor said that his expectations changed. He said that he wasn’t sure that they would all get into college, he just hoped that they would grow up to be responsible citizens, that they would be law abiding and employed, that they would stay alive.

49 of those 59 5th graders did graduate from high school or get their GED. And almost all of them enrolled in college. But college was hard for all of the kids and only 11 graduated. One of the college graduates said they just had to keep remembering the vision for what they hoped to accomplish and put in the work.

For me it was the mentor who made it all possible. The mentor had encouraged the kids and tried to remind them of the hope that was before them. The mentor had relationships with all of the kids, and he said that his mission was to help the students find alternate paths to success, and to show them that they could try something different.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Faith is about remembering that God comes to us, just like the mentor for those 5th graders, wherever we might be. Jesus refuses to let dead bolts or chains block the movement of love toward the one who lacks faith. “When doubt crowds our hope, we can be confident that Jesus will come to meet us where we are, even if it is out on the far edge of faith that has forgotten how to believe.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Answers to our most profound and desperate questions about life come not because we seek them but because God comes seeking us, stepping through the walls that hardship builds around us, offering love and grace. We are not alone but have, in fact, been always, already found. That is grace, God’s grace.

1. http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/the-promise-two-wealthy-men-set-out-to-transform-the-lives-of-59-poor-kids/2011/12/15/gIQAd13syO\_story.html [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Feasting on the Word. Article by Serene Jones. p. 402 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)