

The Second Sunday of Easter 2022 C
April 24, 2022
John 20:19-31
(Sermon by the Reverend Michelle Manicke)

In John's gospel, Jesus doesn't call his disciples; he finds them. He finds them as they are and where they are – whether they're an Israelite sitting idly under a fig tree, a Samaritan woman surreptitiously drawing water from a well in the heat of the day, a former blind man who's been driven out of the synagogue by the religious leaders, or a group of fearful, grief-stricken disciples huddled behind locked doors in the liminal space between the dead certainty of crucifixion and the living hope of resurrection.

I can't speak for you, of course, but from where I sit on this Second Sunday of Easter, huddled behind the locked door of my own troubled heart, the message that Jesus will find me where I am and love me as I am is just what I need to hear.... I think you're all aware we've had a lot of deaths in our Zoar church family since last July, and in addition to the 14 members we've lost, we also held memorial and graveside services for four others who had a connection with Zoar. So, in the course of planning all these funeral services over the past ten months, I've had occasion to sit around a lot of tables with a lot of families who found themselves locked in the soul-piercing, mind-numbing pain of fresh grief. As I've sat with those families, and as my own family sat around the table after my mother died last June, I've noticed that sometimes someone is missing. Sometimes there are family members who choose not to sit around the table because they need their own private space for grieving.... Many of us are well acquainted with these personal, yet universal experiences of grief, and so, we should be mindful that the experience of Jesus' first disciples was probably quite similar. In fact, I can't help wondering whether this is the reason Thomas isn't with the other disciples when the risen Jesus shows up on the evening of the first Easter.

At the beginning of today's reading from John's gospel, it's the evening of the day of resurrection, and yet Jesus' friends aren't feasting and rejoicing with loud alleluias. With the exception of Thomas, who's gone off to grieve by himself, we find them silently fasting and lamenting, as they huddle around the very same table where they shared a last meal with Jesus before his death. After all, this is their family table – the place where their Lord washed their feet and gave them the gift of his teaching to equip them for the work of ministry. In the wake of deep grief, it's only natural that the disciples would retreat to the place where they feel closest to their Lord.

You see, in spite of Mary Magdalene's having seen the risen Lord, and in spite of Peter and the Beloved Disciple's having seen the empty tomb, Jesus' friends don't yet have clue what it means that Jesus has been raised from the dead. On the one hand, they can't help wondering: "If it's really true that Jesus is alive, how will we ever be able to face him after deserting him in his time of trial?" On the other hand, the disciples are simultaneously terrified that those who arrested Jesus and had him put to death on the cross could show up at any moment to do the same thing to them!... But instead of a cohort of soldiers and priests pounding on the door of the house, there comes a quiet knock on the door of their hearts. And when the startled disciples look up, they're astonished to see that Jesus has found them behind locked doors, in the very midst of their fear and grief and confusion.... Jesus finds them where they are, and he loves them as they are. "Peace be with you," are the first words out of his mouth. Jesus offers his friends peace and forgiveness! He doesn't reject them, and he doesn't scold them or shame them for fleeing when he was crucified. On the contrary, Jesus offers them peace, and he breathes new life into them through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Having literally "inspired" his disciples by breathing into them, Jesus then commissions them to continue his work of healing and reconciliation, saying, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

On the heels of this commissioning, the narrator informs us that Thomas isn't there when Jesus shows up. And when the other disciples eagerly share the news that they've seen the Lord, Thomas isn't ready to take their word for it. As one who always speaks his mind, Thomas boldly asks for what he needs, "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 and I don't know what the other disciples say in response, but we do know that they hold space for Thomas and his questioning. They don't kick him out of the community, and they don't try to change his mind. They simply welcome their companion to the family table, and in doing so, they create space for what happens next. A week after Jesus' first appearance in the house, the risen Lord shows up again, and this time he goes out of his way to find Thomas right where he is and to offer him just what he needs. After greeting all the disciples with a word of peace, Jesus gives his full attention to Thomas. Notice that he doesn't reject Thomas, nor does he scold or shame him. On the contrary, Jesus opens himself to Thomas's questions. He literally bares his wounds to his wounded disciple, offering Thomas the opportunity to touch the scars in his hands and side.... The narrator doesn't tell us whether Thomas actually reaches out his hand to touch Jesus' wounds, but that doesn't really matter. What does matter is that this intimate encounter of being found in the very presence of God leads Thomas to new insight and to a bold confession of faith, "My Lord and my God!..." Thomas is the first of all the disciples to recognize that his Lord, Jesus Christ, is the Word who "became flesh and lived among us...full of grace and truth" for the sake of this world God so loves. By his heartfelt confession, Thomas affirms the mysterious truth of John 1:18: "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known."

I wonder: What does all this mean for you and me and for Jesus' other disciples today? Where and when and how do we experience the risen Lord finding us when we're hiding behind locked doors, or when we're locked down in grief, or locked up in some type of personal prison? I expect each of us will have somewhat different answers to these questions based on our own unique circumstances. And yet the thing that's true for all of us is that our Lord will find us wherever we are, he will love us however we are, and as we abide in his presence, he will offer us the gift of peace that passes all understanding.

To sum up, the Good News for today is that our risen Lord never gives up on us, but instead keeps showing up to find us in the midst of our fear and grief and confusion. Jesus shows up with us and for us still bearing the wounds of the crucifixion because the God who took on flesh is intimately acquainted with the pain of human suffering. Our loving Creator also knows that we as individuals bear different kinds of wounds that require different approaches to healing, and through Jesus, God has revealed God's never-ending love that doesn't want to leave Thomas or any of God's other children locked out of God's house. And so, when you and I gather in Christ's name and hold space for the vulnerable ones in our community, the risen Christ will be present with us, just as he has promised. He'll find each of us right where we are, and he'll offer us just what we need: peace and forgiveness, new life and renewed purpose, so that together we may become the very Body of Christ for the sake of this world God so loves.... Of course, the resurrection is an open mystery, so there's no way we can know for certain when and where and how our Lord will show up next. But based on the witness of Scripture, it would seem that one of the best places to wait is right here in the community of people God has gathered and commissioned to be the Body of Christ for the sake of the world. Indeed, the promise is true that wherever two or more are gathered in his name, Christ will come over and over again to find and sustain his disciples. He comes to us in Word and Water, in Bread and Wine, and in the community of God's people. By the power of the Holy Spirit, our Risen Lord abides with us, giving us the courage and strength we need to continue his ongoing work of loving and blessing our neighbors, so that they, too, may experience Christ's presence and "come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and [...] through believing, [they] may have life in his name."¹ Amen.

¹ John 19:31.