

The Resurrection Way of Surprise

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on John 20:19-31
on April 16, 2023, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

I.

I read this week a story from *Smithsonian* magazine about a travel writer from the early part of the 1900s who loved to tell strange stories. One of his favorites was a story about a man who, while traveling far from home, fell into a cataleptic state in which everyone around him assumed him to be dead. They carried him to the town's undertaker, who fitted him for a coffin, put the lid loosely on top, and then left to go home and eat his dinner.

Well that night in the middle of the night, the supposedly dead man woke up. He sat up, looked around, tried to figure out where in the world he was, and discovered, of course, that he was in a room full of coffins. He got out of his, and began pushing the lids off one, then another, and another after that, only to find nothing – and no one – inside. After awhile, he said to himself, “my Lord, I have been late all my life, and now it turns out that I’ve missed the resurrection!”¹

II.

We gather today on this week after resurrection Sunday – a week after the lilies were fresh, and the cross was flowered, and the outfits were new, and the bells rang, and the Sanctuary was full. And every year in the Christian lectionary, that rhythm of texts and movements that anchors a three-year cycle of worship, the Sunday after Easter offers this two-part story: first, of the terrified disciples, locked in their room on Easter night and surprised by the risen Jesus who breathed life into their fear; and then, of Thomas, who, a

¹ *Smithsonian*, October 1995. First read and enjoyed in Joanna Adams' sermon, “Locked Doors,” <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2002/040702.html>.

week later, still wasn't convinced of his friends' stories and was surprised by the wounded Christ.

On the night of Jesus' resurrection, his disciples were crowded into a locked room paralyzed in their fear. Their bellies still churning with the shame and the grief of Friday, but their eyes alive with the rumors they'd heard from Mary. And right there in their midst came an old-yet-new Jesus appearing among them bearing words of calm and forgiveness, "Peace be with you." It's no accident that the first thing Jesus does is to show his wounds — extending nail-scarred hands, and showing his pierced side. And wounds lead to recognition! Amidst their surprise, Jesus offers peace again and breathed upon them the Spirit of life.

And then Jesus came to Thomas. Oh Thomas, that is, the one history has called "Doubting." I've always thought Thomas to be the "I do my own research" guy, the 5 on the Enneagram, the investigator, the one who refuses to be hoodwinked. So when eleven of his closest friends tell them about the resurrected Jesus, no matter how much he trusts them or loves them or believes them, he's the one who has to see for himself. "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," Thomas says, "I will not believe." Because he wasn't there at the cross, and didn't see the nails driven into his Lord's hands, and didn't hear the thunder roll as Jesus breathed his last, and didn't feel his presence in the garden, he has to experience Jesus himself, otherwise he wonders if he's missed the resurrection. He's the Thomas that the Gospel of John calls "the twin," about which Frederick Buechner says, "if you want to know who the

other twin is, I can tell you. I am the other twin, and unless I miss my guess, so are you.”² Oh yes, we know Thomas.

Like with the disciples before him, the pattern repeats. Jesus extends peace and then invites Thomas into his wounds. *Put your hands here*, he says, *look at my hands, see for yourself*, trusting the wounds all the while to tell the story of new life. Jesus didn’t say, “just believe because I told you to,” rather he understood precisely what Thomas needed and instead beckoned him, “put your hands right in my wounds.” Jesus didn’t ostracize Thomas, saying, “your doubt makes me think less of you,” or “doubt has no place near me,” or “doubt means you’re not really one of my followers,” rather he went straight to Thomas and honored that doubt with an experience that changed Thomas’s life. Again: the wounds lead to recognition. “My Lord and my God!” Thomas says, finally seeing for the first time.

III.

Christian theologian N. T. Wright wrote a little book about resurrection called *Surprised by Hope*, where he examines the question: *how do we know what we know?* From the Enlightenment to now, he tracks the modern path of knowing for those of us living in the Western world, a knowing that just doesn’t give room for questionable things like resurrection. Because things like that just don’t happen. There’s no evidence! There’s no science! As he says, “If you can’t see it, touch it, weigh it, or measure it, it isn’t true or real.”³

But somewhere along the way, Christians began to equate belief with certainty, forgetting that in Greek and Latin, “belief” means “to give one’s whole heart.” Somewhere along the way, we fooled ourselves into thinking that we’re not faithful if we have questions, or we’re not strong enough if we

² Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark*.

³ N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, p69.

hold the God's story of love up against every loss, every grief, every trauma, every horror of this world and see if we're found wanting. Somewhere along the way, we fooled ourselves into thinking that if Jesus should be at the center of our public life, then we needed him unblemished by battle or sanitized from suffering – stripping away his real, raw human scars and making him the strongman who muscles people into submission. Somewhere along the way, Christians and churches decided they needed to be *shiny* – too shiny, if you ask me – too polished, too perfect, too obsessed with victory and winning, too unwilling to be honest about one's wounds, too uninterested in sharing the burdens of another's, and in turn, have moved past, covered up, papered over the real hurt that has come from within. Somewhere along the way, we forgot that God doesn't dismiss our doubts or sufferings, but rather understands that it's precisely **through** those doubts and sufferings that we can actually believe!

Thankfully, these early glimpses of a resurrected Christ weren't saddled with thousands of years of what Christianity has defined as "belief." They didn't wield the heavy hand of power or the chisel of the state. They didn't come cloaked in patriarchy or offered with a side of consumerism. They weren't loaded with American evangelical Christian culture centering questions like "have you asked Jesus into your heart?," and "have you been saved?," and "what would Jesus do?" They didn't expect the formula that believing + behaving = belonging, or that the right way to believe included a 30-minute morning quiet time, easy black and white answers, the Roman Road, and a placid, unquestioning life of faith. They didn't layer on the expectations that "belief" meant total adherence to the purity of denominational creed or inherited doctrine.

No! These first encounters with Jesus were flesh-and-blood **experiences**, with people whose faces were still stained with tears, whose fear invaded every moment, whose hope seemed entirely lost. To weeping, pleading Mary, to the numb yet loyal women first to the tomb, to the terrified Twelve over ordinary bread and sacred word, to the wandering disciples walking aimlessly to Emmaus, to Simon Peter paralyzed by his shame, Jesus showed up. **And belief – giving over one’s whole heart – emerged by way of surprise.** In each gospel, Jesus appears - wounded yet whole - to a grieving, confused, fearful friend, the encounter unfolds, they’re surprised as they recognize him, and believe. “My Lord and my God!,” Thomas says. The surprise of recognition.

That Jesus came back in body and not just in spirit is essential for understanding what resurrection means, what belief means, what Jesus means. That Jesus returned with wounds still visible means Jesus meets us right there, as he did with Thomas before us, with kindness and knowing, his new life forever a life bearing the mark of death. That Jesus invites belief from those surrounded by community means Jesus knows sometimes we need the community to believe with our whole hearts when we ourselves wobble. **That Jesus connected his wounds to his story means he knows we do too.**

IV.

It’s no surprise to any of us that we know Thomas, because this story of wounds and doubts, of fear and experience is our story too.

We know what it feels like to struggle to believe, to be in such anguish that we remain stuck for fear of what we’ll encounter. We know the crisis of trust, even in those who know us and love us best. We know that our wounds

lock us inside rooms of abandonment, despair, fear, indifference, codependence, neglect, oppression, rooms we never think we're free to leave.

Yet if Thomas's story can encourage us at all, may we be encouraged by this: Faith isn't the absence of doubt or the presence of certainty. Jesus is not asking us to feel confident that we have it all figured out, or to act like we don't have any questions or concerns. Quite the opposite, actually. Rather, faith is the courage to not be paralyzed by either doubt or certainty, to step out of the locked rooms of our lives with curiosity for what we might find. Faith is trust, the fierce hope that allows us to trust the blowing winds of the Spirit to propel us from what chains us toward what sets us free.

So I wonder: what locked rooms are you terrified to leave? Is the risk greater of being stuck inside or being free? What wounds of yours might you now approach with gentle curiosity? What wounds of this world might you bear witness too, place your hands to, touch the heart of as an act of faith in the crucified and resurrected Lord?⁴

"What Easter does," N. T. Wright says, "is open windows of the mind and heart to see what really, after all, might be possible in God's world." So to every one of us whose wounds mark us but do not end us, Jesus says this: *"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe!"*

Let's not miss the resurrection, friends! Let's receive the breath of Christ and let it send us forth. Let's allow our wounds to find healing even as they offer healing to others. Let's move from being paralyzed with fear to surprised by hope. Let's discover what might be possible in God's world.

I've told you before of Dr. Allan Boesak – humanitarian, theologian and leader in South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle – who imagined what it will

⁴ This section inspired by Kate McIlhagga's poem, "Thomas"

be like when our own resurrected bodies stand before God. “One day,” he says, “God will say to us welcome into my kingdom... [now] where are your wounds? And we will say, we have no wounds. *And God will say, did you find nothing worth fighting for?*⁵

My Lord and my God!

Amen.

⁵ As shared with me by my dear friend, Rev. Alan Sherouse.