

The UMC of Berea
1 Peter 1.3-9; John 20.19-31
2nd Sunday of Easter

One of the great blessings for me last Sunday—Easter Sunday—came after our worship service, while a few of us were carrying flowers from our chancel area out to the front porch where they could be picked up and taken home. The great blessing was being with a few of you briefly—not just your voices on the phone or your images on a Zoom meeting—but to be six feet away from you briefly, in the flesh.

That, of course, is what I miss so much right now, during this time of loving one another by being apart. I love connecting with you online, through emails and phone calls, but I miss our bodies being gathered in the same building, the same room. After all, we human beings are embodied creatures, gifted not only with minds and spirits but with bodies, too. And our faith tradition celebrates this, trusting not only in *resurrection* but in “the resurrection *of the body*”: the sacredness of our bodies, our flesh.

Today’s Gospel reflects this as Jesus shows up in the flesh, a resurrected body complete with wounds and scars. Even in resurrection, God joins us in the vulnerability of our bodies, susceptible to pain, disease, and breakdown over time. All that is part of our bodies’ sacred gift. But as we know, it also can be a significant source of fear. Graciously, today’s story reflects that reality, too.

The day of Jesus’ resurrection is reported as a “mixed bag” for Jesus’ followers, ranging from mistaken identity and confusion to both immense joy and paralyzing fear. John tells us that on the evening of the first Easter Day, the disciples are “behind closed doors,” having run away from the possibility and promise of Easter morning.

The story’s clear that the doors are locked because of a very specific fear: that those who orchestrated the lynching of Jesus just might come for them next. Even before Jesus’ death, Peter was so afraid that he denied knowing Jesus; Judas was so afraid that he betrayed Jesus, literally “selling him out” to those who would arrest, torture, and kill him. Jesus’ followers must have feared one another at this point, wondering who among them would betray the others next.

It is into that context—fear and uncertainty—that Jesus, in a body, appears. He doesn’t bother breaking down the door or even unlocking it. He appears—through the wall set up by their fear—greeting them with words of peace. He shows them “his hands and his side”: his wounds, his vulnerability. And the disciples are “filled with joy.”

Jesus again offers words of comfort, this time with a commission: “Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I’m sending you.” And he empowers them to fulfill that calling, breathing on them, saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

Even not in an age of respiratory pandemic, being “breathed upon” by God is a mighty thing. Jesus gives new life in the Spirit, the life-giving breath of God. The image recalls again the creation story in Genesis—God breathing life into human beings—and the image from Ezekiel we heard a few weeks ago—God breathing life into a valley of dry bones: animated by God’s breath, becoming—through God’s Spirit—a resurrected community of God’s hopeful people.

But today’s story tells us not all members of this community were present when the risen Christ first appeared. “Thomas, called Didymus”—*the twin*—was missing. When he rejoins his

friends, they tell him what has happened—“We’ve seen the Lord!”—and Thomas utters the phrase we hear this Sunday every year, the phrase that’s labeled him, “doubting Thomas”:

Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, put my finger in the wounds left by the nails, and put my hand into his side, I won’t believe.

For this, Thomas has gotten a bit of a bad reputation. But I cannot imagine his doubts were any greater than those of the others before their “in-the-flesh” encounter with the risen Christ. Like them, Thomas, too, wants to experience the risen One with all his senses.

And I wonder, too, if perhaps Thomas had a hard time believing the others because he did not notice any difference in them. If Jesus really had been raised from the dead and appeared to them and given them the power of the Holy Spirit, shouldn’t they be overjoyed, ready to proclaim to the world that Jesus is, indeed, “the way, the truth, the life,” and all the rest? Shouldn’t they be changed?

Instead, eight days after the risen Christ walked through the door and sent them, they are still there, unable to move: a week later, still filled with doubt and fear. They hardly seem the beginning of a movement that will go and “transform the world.” They are stuck there, huddled behind locked doors, even though the once-crucified, now-resurrected Jesus has been there, giving them a tangible experience of resurrection and instructions for how to respond.

...which suggests that their fear is about something other—something more—than death. I am sure they are afraid of dying like Jesus, but even more, now they are afraid of something else: afraid of life, specifically the resurrected life—this strange new way of living into which the risen Christ has sent them.

And so, Jesus comes to them again—in their fearful hiding—greeting them with words of peace, and then turning his attention to Thomas:

Put your finger here. Look at my hands. Put your hand into my side. No more disbelief. Believe!

Jesus does not wait for Thomas to stop doubting. Jesus does not wait for the rest of them to unlock the doors. Christ shows up. That is what the resurrected One always does. And that is very good news, indeed.

That means Jesus comes to us as to Thomas, placing us, too, in the middle of the Easter experience. God comes to us as to Thomas and the rest: before we stop doubting, before we overcome our fear, before we learn to trust that we can unlock the doors of our false security.

The truth is, even without a pandemic, we live in a culture consumed by doubt and fear, pervading modern life, filling so much rhetoric that demonizes one supposed “side” or the “other,” whipping up fear about our neighbors. Sometimes, it makes us just want to hunker down and hide, not only physically but emotionally and spiritually, too.

Into this reality, today’s story reminds us of good news: that God brings Easter—resurrection reality—to us in whatever we are doing, and especially when we are afraid and filled with doubt. No matter how hard we try to keep God’s power and promise out of our lives, thanks be to God, persistently and graciously, God keeps reaching out to us, anyway.

...which means that wherever we are and whatever we are experiencing—whatever we are struggling with or hiding from—God is there to love and accompany and empower us through it. God is there—God is *here*—to help us discover that we, too, are an active part of resurrection—we, too, are part of the continuing Easter story—we, too, are the body of Christ, risen to new life and love and peace and grace that has the power to transform all our fear into faith.

And so, Easter—resurrection—becomes the vocation and the vision for our lives. As Jesus was sent, now we are sent. Jesus’ mission—in its totality—now is ours. The gospel is entrusted to us, and so, if that good news is going to mean anything at all in this world, then we must hear and respond to its message again and again.

The work of resurrection still must be done. The joy of Easter must be repeated and proclaimed by you and me as Easter people, announcing news that’s very different from the “news” we hear in other parts of our live. It’s easy to be seduced by messages of scarcity and death, fear and despair. We have a different message to share.

Easter challenges our “back to normal,” challenges our stubborn reluctance to address real inequities among us—so many of which have been amplified by present circumstances—challenges our well-practiced conviction that self-interest is a legitimate grounding for public policy, that the “economy” is our primary concern.

Easter offers us a new way to be in the world—in our neighborhoods, even in our own bodies. That “new way” is what we’re called to practice—to embody more fully, day by day. We are the body of Christ—together, the community sent to carry on the mission of the crucified and risen Christ: always, everywhere, without fear. As 1 Peter reminds us:

Although we’ve never seen him, we love him. Even though we don’t see him now, we trust him and so rejoice with a glorious joy.

And with that joy, we continually proclaim—through our words and through our behaviors—that Christ is risen; Christ is risen, indeed. Thanks be to God. Amen.