

Behind Closed Doors

John 20:19-31

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Last week, we were with Mary and Peter and the unnamed disciple peering bewilderedly into an empty tomb. This week, we're behind closed doors with Thomas.

“Doubting Thomas,” we call him. Unfairly, for the most part.

Thomas is hardly alone in needing to see to believe. Mary and the other disciples wouldn't have believed unless they had seen Jesus either. Thomas just gets a bad rap because he demanded what the others got as a surprise.

But on to the story itself. Let's set the stage:

All the events of Holy Week are in the rearview mirror—arrest, crucifixion, burial.

Mary and the disciples have discovered an empty tomb, but in the early stages have no idea what it means (they assume someone has taken the body).

And then, Jesus appears! First to Mary, then later to the disciples, who are overjoyed.

But Thomas missed the party and he's skeptical. I doubt many of us have a hard time putting ourselves in Thomas's shoes at this point.

It's one thing to hear about the risen Jesus from others. Thomas knows that the tomb was empty. He knows that his friends say they have seen Jesus alive. But he wants to see for himself.

A week later, he gets his wish. The disciples are behind locked doors again and suddenly Jesus is there.

“Unless I see” becomes actual seeing! And what does Thomas see?

Well, he sees a physical Jesus.

Not a ghost. Not an apparition. Not an inspiring metaphor for hope.

No, he sees Jesus.

He sees the wound where the spear dug into Jesus’ side. He sees the hands that had ugly metal spikes driven through them.

He sees his friend, his teacher, his Messiah—the very man that he had seen bleeding and dying on that Roman cross.

Alive.

My Lord and my God!

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We are two thousand plus years down from that initial shock. What does Jesus’ encounter with Thomas have to say to us all these years later?

I don’t often have “three-point sermons” but I want us to notice three important things. I have very cleverly called these “Three truths from Thomas.”

1. The risen Christ still has wounds.

This is worth pondering. Jesus doesn’t emerge from the tomb and appear to his disciples as a shiny, scrubbed up superhero. He doesn’t just shrug off the evidence of crucifixion as a speed bump on the superhighway to new creation.

And I don’t even think his wounds remain as a kind of object lesson for the disciples, as if to eliminate the possibility of saying, “Maybe we just *thought* we saw him die up there...”

The cross has permanently left its mark upon Jesus.

Jesus carries his wounds into the reality created by resurrection. This is a deep mystery.

The Christian hope is that one day, wounds will be healed—the pains that have afflicted us, the traumas we’ve endured, the scars we’ve accumulated will no longer define us in the new creation.

And I think this is true. They will not *define* us. But perhaps they will never finally cease to be part of our story, even if their only role is to recede into the background or to somehow be woven into a deeper, better story.

This week, Jen passed along an interview with an American politician named Ben Sasse.

Sasse is 54 and has late-stage pancreatic cancer. He likely only has months to live. And, quite incredibly given his pain and the toll his treatments are taking on his body, he’s busy doing the podcast circuit, speaking about life and death and plenty of things in between.

He’s doing so humour, with grace, with theological insight, and with hope. I highly recommend this interview.

At any rate, the host, Ross Douthat from *The New York Times*, says to him: “I assume you've prayed for healing.

Yes, sir.

God hasn't answered those prayers yet. Are you angry at God ever?

No.

Not at all?

No. I wouldn't want a sovereign God to defer to all my prayers with a yes, because I'm not omniscient. I don't know what the weaving together of the tapestry of full redemption should look like.¹

What remarkable faith. And what a beautiful way to describe it: “the tapestry of full redemption.” Somehow, the sufferings of this world—yours, mine, Christ’s—contribute to this tapestry.

¹ <https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/interesting-times-with-ross-douthat/id1438024613?i=1000760431921>

We believe that the life of Christ will one day swallow up death and pain, but it will not obliterate us in the process—it will not eliminate the people we have been and the things that have formed us along the way, even suffering.

And Jesus never ceases to be the Crucified One, the Word who was made flesh for our sake, the One whose punishment has become our peace. These things remain true, even for the resurrected Christ.

Again, this is a deep mystery. But I think that for those who suffer, it is comforting to know that the resurrected Christ still bears his wounds.

2. The risen Christ comes looking for us—even behind closed doors.

I love this aspect of the story. Jesus comes *to* the disciples. He doesn't summon them out to some mountaintop for a victory speech. He doesn't issue a breaking news alert from the Jerusalem temple.

He doesn't say, "I'm back. You can all come crawling out of the holes that you went and hid in when I needed you."

Rather, he goes looking for his friends. He comes to them in their weakness, hiding fearfully behind locked doors.

Hiding is the most natural thing to do when we are afraid isn't it? It's the most natural thing to do when we feel ashamed, or uncertain or feeling faithless and defeated, as the disciples surely must have.

This is what we do when we feel these things. We lock ourselves in, perhaps not behind actual doors, but we have all kinds of ways of closing ourselves off, don't we?

We hide behind our skepticism. Our fear. Our pain. We retreat into the imagined safety of what we can prove, what's socially acceptable, the small and bleak parameters of our blasted out secular landscape.

We shrink away from the risk of faith, the risk of love. We don't allow ourselves to believe that we *are* loved by God.

We so often conceive of the life of faith as something that *we* do. We are the ones who seek God on our personal spiritual journeys. And this is partially true. *Seek and you shall find.*

But the even deeper truth is that Jesus comes looking for us.

He seeks us out, in all our weakness and fear and doubt. Before we take one step toward Christ, he loves us and looks for us and comes to us.

3. The risen Christ honours our doubts... and calls us beyond them.

Jesus doesn't wag his finger at Thomas and say, "How could you be so faithless and fickle?" He doesn't shake his head and say, "You know, Thomas, you really have trust issues! Why couldn't you accept the testimony of those who saw me? Why didn't remember everything I said to you while I was alive? What's *wrong* with you, Thomas?!"

He doesn't say any of those things.

He says, "Ok, you say you won't believe unless you see and touch? Well ok, then. Here you go. Put your finger in my side. Look at my hands."

Jesus graciously accommodates to Thomas's weakness.

(And, we must remember, Thomas wasn't any more faithless than the others, just more explicit about what he would need to believe!)

Jesus doesn't condemn Thomas. He meets him where he is and then invites him onward in the journey of faith and discipleship.

Stop doubting and believe.

He does the same for us. He meets us where we are with a word of peace and then invites us onward on the journey.

He invites us into the risk and the joy and the hope and the promise of the life of faith. He calls us to trust him beyond what we can see and touch for ourselves.

He doesn't condemn Thomas for needing these things. I think we often supply an imaginary second clause to Jesus' words to Thomas.

*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe... **and** cursed or less faithful or weak are those who need to see or who struggle to believe.*

But Jesus doesn't say that. He doesn't condemn doubt. He works with it and calls us to keep going beyond it, *despite* it.

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Jesus first word to frightened disciples behind locked doors is "peace." *Peace be with you.* What about his last words?

His last words, as we've heard, are "Blessed are those who have *not* seen and yet have believed."

That's us.

Jesus is talking about *us* here. We, who long to see, who would have loved to see, to touch, to hear from Jesus himself.

We, who believe based on the testimony of those first witnesses, we who encounter the risen Christ in bread and wine, in the community of faith, in the new life that is possible in lives given over to the lordship of Jesus.

Jesus calls us blessed.

And we are.

John concludes this chapter by saying that Jesus performed all kinds of other signs not recorded in his gospel, but these are written that we might believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing we might have life in his name.

And we do. And we will.

This doesn't mean that we will never have doubts or be afraid or struggle in the life of faith. It doesn't mean that living into the new reality of resurrection will be straightforward and uncomplicated.

But we keep on living into this blessing and this life, because we are convinced that the risen Christ has changed everything, for this life and the life to come.

I close with the words of the British writer Francis Spufford from his book *Unapologetic*. It's one of the most beautiful descriptions of the life of faith in the light of Easter that I have encountered:

You accept [faith] as one of the givens of your life. **You learn from it the slow rewards of fidelity.** You watch as the repetition of Christmases and Easters, births and deaths and resurrections, scratches on the linear time of your life a rough little model of His permanence.

You discover that repetition itself, curiously, is not the enemy of spontaneity, but maybe even its enabler. Saying the same prayers again and again, pacing your body again and again through the same movements of faith, **somehow helps keep the door ajar through which He may come...**

[Y]ou make faith your vantage point, your habitual place to stand. And you get used to the way the human landscape looks from there: reoriented, reorganized, different.²

The resurrection of Jesus has changed the landscape. It has given us a new place to stand.

And so, we keep on seeking the same Jesus who seeks us out, even behind closed doors.

The same Jesus who says, "Peace be with you. Don't be afraid. Stop doubting and believe."

Amen.



² Francis Spufford, *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), 208.