

Second Sunday Of Easter – Matt Gemmer

Acts 4:32-35; Psalm 133; 1 John 1:1-2:2; John 20:19-31

I can relate to the disciples in this passage. When I was in 1st or 2nd grade, I also went into hiding. The school that I attended from kindergarten through 12th grade was all one building. It was a small private school, and everyone basically knew each other. The elementary had its own wing and the high school had its own as well. My older brother was popular among the middle and high school kids, and because of this, they knew me too. I would frequently joke around with my brother's friends after school when waiting for the bus or they would playfully tease me if they happened to see me passing through the hallways.

One night at a high school basketball game at my school, I was out in the concessions area playing with some of my friends, and I saw a group of my brother's middle school friends sitting at a table. One of the guys who was a big jokester was eating some nachos. Without him noticing, I came up behind him, grabbed one of his nachos, dipped it in the cheese, and quickly ate it, waiting to see his reaction. He turned around, and that's when I figured it out. It wasn't my brother's friend. It was some middle school kid from the opposing school. He looked straight at me as if... well, as if some random little kid had just stolen his nachos, and said a string of words that I won't repeat right now.

I tried to explain to this guy that I thought he was someone else, but he didn't seem to care. Clearly my life was in danger. I knew that I couldn't be seen any more for the rest of the night in fear of what this kid would do, so I told one of my friends about the incident and then scrambled into the auditorium and hid under the stage for a while.

I'm pretty sure one of my friends eventually told me that the coast was clear and that guy was no longer in sight, so it was safe for me to come out. But I stayed in there a while longer, because I just had this gut feeling that this guy was sifting through the crowd during the game, picking out little kids and interrogating them, trying to figure out who stole his nachos.

Although I did fear for my life, Jesus never appeared to me under the stage that night, so maybe this story isn't quite like the one we see in John 20.

We first see in this story something that is perhaps quite familiar to us both in scripture and in our own present lives — that is, men not listening to women. In the verse immediately prior to today's reading, Mary Magdalene goes and announces to the disciples that she has seen the risen Lord. And when we read the two verses back-to-back, it's easy to catch.

Starting in verse 18: *Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her. 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."*

New Testament scholar at Southern Methodist University, Jaime Clark-Scoles, points out one of John's favorite motifs: "Light versus darkness. Like the Samaritan woman, Mary Magdalene is a person of the day, the light, out in the Garden. Like Nicodemus, the disciples are huddled in the darkness that comes from 'hiding out' for one reason or another."

Rather than trusting their fellow disciple and embracing a new life with the risen Christ, the disciples lock themselves in and cower in fear.

But we can't really blame the disciples either. The text says the doors were locked for fear of the Jews. The Jews being talked about here are not simply anyone who was Jewish, but more specifically, the religious-political leaders. The common-folk of the day wouldn't have cared about or probably even known any of these disciples. But those with religious and political power might be out to interrogate or even kill any close followers of Jesus.

And then the power of resurrection happens. Although the text doesn't explicitly state that Jesus walked through the locked doors, John phrases it as if Jesus suddenly appeared one way or another.

You can't stop God from showing up.

Perhaps many of us in the church panic or become fearful about prayer or the Bible being banned in public schools. This passage serves as a reminder that even locked doors cannot shut God out, so we need not worry about anything else. To think that not allowing prayer in a school somehow disallows God's presence is to misunderstand the resurrection. You can't lock God out of anything. Resurrection unlocks doors and transcends laws.

In what is known by many scholars as the Johannine Pentecost, and perhaps even the high point of the story, Jesus breathes on the disciples the Holy Spirit. The peace that Jesus initially offers here is not simply a kind of pleasant greeting, but a declarative promise. It is a statement that had to be made to calm their fear of death, coupled with seeing their teacher who was dead suddenly appear to them. I assume this was not a genuinely peaceful moment. But God shows up during times of fear.

Jesus then empowers the disciples after they have received the Holy Spirit, *If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.* New Testament scholar Dr. Leon Morris claims that it is not the power to forgive or retain sins that is most important, but the receiving of the Holy Spirit. "John is not writing as though there were a series of gifts made to individuals. Rather, he speaks of a collective gift made to the group as a whole." God empowers us in our fear.

Then we get to the part that everyone loves to talk about: Doubting Thomas! We don't know why, but Thomas was not with them the first time Jesus appeared. Maybe that's a good thing. Maybe while the disciples locked themselves in, Thomas was out feeding the hungry. Although Thomas often times gets a bad rap, it's fair to note that nobody anticipated Jesus coming back. Everyone doubted. The disciples are hiding in a building. And they only believe because they get

to witness the risen Christ. Thomas simply experiences the same thing as the disciples. He just wants to see for himself.

But he doesn't just want to see. Thomas is emphatic about it all. Unless he sees and puts his fingers in the wounds, then he will not believe. Our scars and wounds (whether physical or metaphorical) say who we are. They are fundamentally a part of our story. The same goes for Jesus. For Thomas, Jesus became something more and something new, and Thomas needs confirmation of the new, but same Christ.

For Thomas, the resurrection is fundamentally physical. He has to **physically** put his fingers in a **physical** wound. And although Thomas sometimes is seen as a kind of villain, seeing how he deals with the resurrection is actually the point of the resurrection. He **embraces** the physicality.

For some of us, the resurrection is a good feeling of salvific security. While this may be a part of the truth of how the resurrection functions, it doesn't tell the whole story. What Jesus presents his followers with here is a **present communal** reality of forgiveness. Jesus doesn't appear so that the disciples will believe, but so they will be commissioned to do physical work as a result of receiving the Holy Spirit.

If resurrection is only spiritual, then what's the point of this story? Who cares about Jesus appearing to and commissioning the disciples? All that matters is life after death! They don't need to go do anything now that Christ has risen.

But this isn't how the story goes.

The writer of John understands that through Christ and in the resurrection, God is redeeming all of creation, and this redemption can come about in part of Christ breathing on the disciples the Holy Spirit and commissioning them. In this passage, Jesus shows us that material things matter, and that our present world after his resurrection is just as important.

It is why we read in the Apostle's Creed, "I believe in the resurrection of the body," and not "I believe in the immortality of the soul," although Socrates would prefer the latter.

It is why our friend Kathy prays every week for those suffering from cancer.

It is why we have a Black Lives Matter sign out in our front lawn.

It is why we put time, effort, and money into places like Eden's Glory and The Simple Room.

It is why we come forward for the Eucharist every single week.

Because our physical bodies and our material world matter.

The physicality of the resurrection is what is happening in Acts, where a group of believers redefines what it means to own property and the distribution of money. It is what is happening in the proclamation in our 1 John reading. And perhaps even the Psalmist in Psalm 133 gets a glimpse of how the power of the resurrection functions, writing about the joy of living presently with our community.

The disciples do not take over Christ's mission in the John narrative. Jesus says, *As the Father has sent me, so I send you.* The disciples, and by extension, us, are simply a continuation of the work of Christ. We have not founded a new one.

The Church's mission is not purely a spiritual one. It must not be restricted to preaching and church planting. It embraces everything that we rightly do in imitation of Christ.

In Christ's resurrection, we are permitted to lock ourselves in, and hide in fear. But Christ will show up, and bestow on us the Holy Spirit, so that we will go and do physical work in a material world that matters to God.

Just as John says in verse 31, *...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.*
Amen.