

Easter Gifts

Acts 2:14a, 22-32; Psalm 16; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31
St. Paul's Free Methodist Church, 19 April 2020

A few years ago I pitched an idea for a book I was calling *Jesus and the Whale*. The book was about how Jesus conquered death and how Christians can live as people of resurrection hope. The idea made it to the stage just before the publisher offers the contract, but it didn't survive the last cut. "In the end," the publisher said, "people don't want to think about death."

Whether we want to or not, we're all thinking about death these days. Every morning the newsfeed at the top of my phone tallies the new cases and deaths that hit while I was sleeping. From social distancing to isolation, to school and restaurant closures, to the proliferation of masks, gloves, and sanitizing agents, Death, it seems, is closing in on us.

Today we gather together, virtually, to see if the gospel has anything to say about Death and the coronavirus. And it turns out it does. Just as Rev. Munshaw announced last week that Christ has defeated Death, so today, we are reminded not only of this truth, but also that God has given us tools of resistance to the fear, paranoia, and hysteria that follow in Death's trail.

Today I want to suggest that God has given us everything we need to face down Death and so live faithfully in this moment. I'd like us to explore how God gives us tools for living well in a death-dealing time such as the one we are now living in. These tools are great news! God has not only defeated death, but he gives us tools for facing down death as we become a resurrection people.

This morning we are going to identify and name three of the gifts God gives us, and I'll propose that by practicing these tools we not only proclaim the gospel, we *live* it. Through these gifts we develop the skills we need to be people of hope even when we're surrounded by so much death. I'm going to use the term "gift" interchangeably with "tool" this morning, and what we'll see is that our Gospel reading shows us three gifts God gives us that are essential for living well in a world gripped by fear and death.

Tool #1. Our first tool for facing down death is the gift of perception. It's a shame that Thomas is known as The Doubter, because the tool he wields so well, perhaps better than any other disciple, is the tool of perception. Thomas sees better than anyone that if we want to follow Jesus, we must face down death. Much earlier in John's Gospel, when Jesus decided to return to Judea for Lazarus even after almost being stoned by the Jews there, Thomas tells the other disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (Jn 11:16). Thomas sees that Jesus's path is not around pain, suffering, and death, but *through* them.

That's why in our reading today he insists he must see and touch Jesus's wounds to believe it's really him. This demand is a strange one for people who see Christianity and Jesus merely as a ticket to heaven and health. If Christianity is all about avoiding pain and suffering, why would Thomas insist on seeing Jesus's wounds? Why not just *turn his eyes upon Jesus and look full in his wonderful face*? But Thomas *knows* that Jesus's wounds would be visible, even now. Thomas knew that resurrection would not eliminate past pain, but rather, it would make it beautiful.

Pain, suffering, and death are not obstacles to our faith. Rather, they provide occasions for our faith to shine all the more brightly. We must never forget that Jesus "conquered death" by dying. Jesus trusted God that even death could not rip him from God's embrace. And he was right. He refused to allow his fear to keep him from faithfulness to God.

It's interesting to me that Thomas wasn't with the disciples the first time Jesus came and stood among them. Maybe if he had been there, he would've unlocked the doors and modeled courage to his fearful friends. Maybe that's why Thomas wasn't there in the first place; he knew that following Jesus means facing down fear because fear can keep us from faithfulness. Whatever explanations we give for Thomas missing Jesus's first appearance to the disciples, we can describe his response today as exemplary because Thomas shows us what the gift of perception can do.

In the scarred body of the resurrected Jesus, Thomas confirms that Death has been swallowed up by Life itself. And in seeing this, Thomas offers us a powerful antidote to our fear of death. Using this gift of perception, Thomas gives us the words for the greatest confession of the Christian tradition: "My Lord and My

God!" With this tool of perception, Thomas shows us that suffering and death are no match for Jesus because Jesus is God. We don't need to be afraid. God is bigger than Covid-19.

Tool #2. The second tool God gives us is to live well during this challenging time is the gift of Peace. Friends, it's long overdue that Christians appreciate the power of peace. Peace is not passive. It's not avoidant. It's not compliant. Peace is powerful and disruptive to human ways that normally tend toward fear and violence. Peter's speech today in Acts names these ways. The same forces that crucified and killed Jesus are still at work in our world. And so it's no accident that three times in our Gospel reading, Jesus says *Peace be with you*. What we learn today is that peace barges through locked doors and calms fearful groups. Peace displays a power this world cannot know on its own, and it's our calling to practice peace in a world that knows only war.

It's strange to hear talk about going to war against the coronavirus. Like the War on Drugs or War on Terror, this seems to be the best the world can do in the face of forces that threaten us. But Christians can do better. Our word is *peace*. And the peace of Christ is far more powerful than the war of this world. God doesn't wage war; God offers peace. And God offers peace to a world that denied, deserted, and murdered him. This does not mean that God grants sin, death, and the devil free reign. Not at all. God confronts these forces and overwhelms them with a peace that takes the worst this world can do and turns it into a story of salvation. *That's power.*

Christ's peace has the power to calm our fears and surpass our understanding. Christ's peace has the power to break the chains of sin and death. Christ's peace mends broken relationships. *That's power.* The very people who denied and deserted Jesus are the same folks he returns to with peace and forgiveness. When Jesus tells the disciples that if they "forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven" (Jn 20:23a) he offers them the gift of peacemaking. Forgiveness is one way we practice the tool of peace.

What better time than now to get practiced, to get *good*, at using the tool of peace? Whether it's forgiving the people we live with, or work with, or knew from long ago, we have ample time and opportunity to forgive and be forgiven. One way we can live well in this coronavirus-moment is to consider all the people at

home who could use Christ's peace barging through their computer screens or mailboxes in the form of confession and forgiveness. Forgiveness, Jesus shows us today, is what peace makes possible. And God has given us this powerful tool to change the world.

Gift #3. The third gift God gives us is all gift. In fact, it's not a tool at all, but a person. The third gift we receive is God's very self: the Holy Spirit. What more could we ask for during a pandemic?! It's a thing of wonder and mystery that Jesus's breath fills us with *God*, especially at a time when someone else's breath could fill us with a virus. The Holy Spirit is not something we use like a tool. The Holy Spirit is God-with-us, filling us and making us new.

God's presence makes us people capable of living in the world with hope. If God is with us, who can stand against us? Not sin, not death, not the devil, and not Covid-19. The Holy Spirit's presence with us, in us, helps us live into God's new creation. This new creation, the author of 1 Peter tells us, is "imperishable, undefiled, and unfading" (1 Pet 1:4). The same author assures us that we can rejoice in this new life even while we "suffer various trials" (1 Pet 1:6), and he calls this a *living hope*. I love that. A *living hope* that goes on in spite of our suffering and trials.

This hope is not a pipedream and it's not a headtrip. It's hope with feet. It's hope that looks like meals on wheels, frontline medical care, grocery deliveries to people most at risk, and offering forgiveness to those who have hurt us immensely. This hope is *active*.

That Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead means all bets are off. We need to cast off our despair because, as the psalmist teaches us, God will not give us up to Death. Jesus's resurrection means we can live lives of hope. Hope that a dead marriage can still rise; hope that the effects of Covid-19 will not be the end of the story; hope that on the other side of death there is Life.

Our hope, my friends, is not naïve. It is based on the truth, the reality, that God has conquered death and all of its minions like Covid-19 by overwhelming it with Life. Death cannot withstand the Peace of Christ and the abundant life of the Living God.

This week I had the opportunity to zoom interview Emilie Townes, the Dean of the Divinity School at Vanderbilt University. Toward the end of the interview I asked her an open-ended question about what she wants to be sure to say about theological education. She responded, *We must always live in hope...Hope is sometimes a misappropriated, undervalued, romanticized gift from God. The kind of hope I'm talking about has legs on it, is ornery when it needs to be, it proclaims the gospel, and even if we may not know why we're saying what we're saying, we say it anyway because somewhere in there we know God sits and rests with us. That kind of hope will get us through.*

The Rev. Dr. Townes tells us that hope has legs. Christian hope isn't shallow or polite; sometimes it's ornery. It rejects the lie that Death will win. Christian hope proclaims the gospel that God is with us, and that even when it's hard for us to see it, we must keep saying it. The church gives us the words that activate the gift of perception.

This morning God gives us everything we need to live well during the coronavirus pandemic. With the tool of perception we see how God envelops our suffering and makes it beautiful. With the gift of peace God makes forgiveness possible and offers us a new way of facing the worst this world has to offer. And with the gift of the Holy Spirit, God with us, we can live as people of active hope when the world around us is trapped in deadly despair.

Receive these words by the Rev. Dr. Townes as the gift of perception that they are:

"God sits and rests with us. That kind of hope will get us through." Thanks be to God.