

19 April 2020

Looking for God . . . In Grief and Pain

John 20:19-29

After Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to Mary alone in the garden, he appeared briefly and selectively to a few of his followers. We read about a couple of those appearances from John's gospel, chapter 20, verses 19-24:

¹⁹ 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.' ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, '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, I will not believe.'

²⁶ A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' ²⁸Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' ²⁹Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

Last week, Easter Sunday, I talked about the resurrection of Christ. Of course I did. It's not only the meaning of Easter; it's the meaning of Christianity. The death, burial, and resurrection of the Son of the God is what distinguishes us from every other faith, and it is what keeps us from being just another benevolent social club. But I also noted last week that, center of our faith or not, the resurrection story is not something we can prove. The accounts in our gospels are generally consistent with each other, but that only means that they are consistently weird. If we want slam-dunk incontrovertible evidence of the resurrection of Christ, our Bible doesn't really provide that. We who believe in Christ's resurrection have to choose to do so and accept it on faith.

Today's story, about Jesus' disciple Thomas, reminds us that this sort of faith is harder for some than others. Some people's minds just work in such a way as to demand more and better evidence than other people require. Maybe you know some of those people. They're the ones who, as children, drove their parents and Sunday School teachers crazy by asking, "But why?" and "How could that happen?" As adults they gravitated away from the humanities and toward the sciences – especially sciences that work with solid, quantifiable data, like mathematics or chemistry or engineering. (Maybe not physics. Physics people are their own weird breed, with one foot in mathematics and one in medieval mysticism or Zen Buddhism.) Anyway, these people trust facts, not intuition; read history instead of novels and *anything* instead of poetry; and they are a normal variation of humanity. Thomas seems to have been one

of those. Though he had followed Christ for months or years and had surely seen miracles, he is still not willing to accept this miracle just on the testimony of his friends. Apparently, he thinks it's more likely that they are either lying or have experienced a mass wish-fulfillment delusion.

When Jesus appears in person to Thomas and holds out his hands and side for him to probe – something he didn't do for the other disciples – he seems to be acknowledging that Thomas's need for proof is of a different kind than that of the others, and he makes a concession to the Thomas-mind. But then, in verse 29, he adds, "There. You have the proof that you need. But blessed are those who can believe without that proof." Because, he seems to imply, solid proof won't usually be offered. As I noted last week, God *could* have arranged the resurrection in such a way that it was impossible to doubt, but apparently chose not to do so. It seems that God doesn't want to be proven. God doesn't want to be easy to believe; God wants us to bet our lives on hope, which is what the Bible means by the word "faith."

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The resurrection of Christ isn't the only thing that fact-based, proof-oriented, logical minds struggle with in Christianity. One of those further questions is one that many may be asking today, as we weather a dangerous global pandemic. Given that we believe that God created this world and loves it . . . why is this happening? The classic formulation of the question is: If God is all-powerful, God can stop evil. If God is all-good, then God would want to stop evil. Evil ain't been stopped. So what's up? Is God not as powerful as we thought? Or not as good? But most people who ask this question don't formulate it in terms of a classic syllogism. Mostly, they formulate it in a cry of pain: "God, how could you let this happen?"

Why did God permit a tsunami to killed thousands in Japan? Or the earthquake that killed thousands in Haiti? Or forest-fires or volcanic eruptions? Why did God permit the appearance of a new form of coronavirus that spreads quickly and easily and to which humans have no natural defenses – a disease that is especially deadly to the elderly? This feels like a time that a loving God might have stepped in. It's a problem, isn't it?

So, people of faith try to sort it out. What is God up to? Three weeks ago, I preached from the book of the Joel, in which the prophet responds to a cataclysmic locust swarm that was destroying Judea. Joel believes that God must have sent the locusts to punish Israel for some sin, so he calls the people to fast and pray for forgiveness. Well, calling the people of God together to pray is a good thing to do – even when there isn't a crisis. But let's stop there. Let us not go the next step with Joel and start looking around for some sin to blame. Here's why: those who see a natural disaster as a divine punishment for sin invariably discover that the sin responsible is a sin of somebody else. In America, the usual suspects are abortion, homosexuality, and same-sex marriage, because the people who like to trot out such arguments tend to be social conservatives. You never hear them suggest that a disaster is a punishment for America's racism or oppression of the poor, because those sins aren't rallying points for their political tribe. In other words, people who look to blame a disaster on sin generally find what they want to find and end up using other people's suffering as a talking point for their own message. Don't listen to those people, and don't do it yourself.

Besides, natural disaster is just that: natural. Notice that we only ask these questions when the disaster touches our own lives. When an earthquake crumbles an uninhabited area of the Gobi Desert, we don't ask what God was up to. We say, "Oh, I didn't know there was a fault

line there! That's interesting!" When lightning starts a wildfire that destroys thousands of acres of natural forest, we don't ask what sin was behind it; we say, "Well, that's how forests rejuvenate. It's part of the natural cycle." It's only when the earthquake hits a major city, or the forest fire destroys a town that we ask, "God, how could you let this happen?" When a new plant disease threatens ferns in temperate rain forests, those of us who aren't botanists ignore it. When a new virus threatens us, suddenly we have questions for God.

Moreover, in our selective attention to disasters that have the effrontery to touch *our* lives, we usually only look at one part of the picture. The reason that the new coronavirus, Covid-19, is so dangerous is that it used to be found in wild animals but mutated and evolved in such a way as to afflict and to be shared by human beings. But because it's new to us, we have no natural immunities to this virus. But that same biological process of evolution is ultimately what will defeat the virus, too, as our own bodies' immune systems mutate and evolve to face the new threat. Scientists working on a vaccine are using those same natural processes, just trying to find a way to speed them up. If we're going to cry out in distress to God – and we should; we should take all our deepest feelings to God – we should remember to thank God for the incredible gift of our own immune systems, without which no disaster would bother us, because we'd be dead already.

So let us not try to read divine messages into this or that natural disaster. Those who do generally look for God but find only their own prejudices. But there is still an important question to ask. Even if we should not blame God for, say, Covid-19, we can still ask why God created a world in which suffering is even possible. Why permit pain at all? But before we go there, let's take a breath, while Jennifer leads us again in prayer and worship.

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So, why – among all the possible worlds that might have been conceived by the infinite imagination of God – why did God create a world in which there is pain and grief and disaster and untimely death? I'm not going to pretend to have a definitive answer, but it's worth asking. Jesus didn't fault Thomas for questioning, so let us question.

And my first question is, can we imagine that world *without* pain and death? Imagine a world like ours except that no matter what we did, we would suffer no painful consequences. If we jumped from the roof, trying to fly, but didn't, we would suffer no injury. Nor could we harm others in this world. If we tried – if we pulled a gun and shot at someone – the bullets would dissolve into nothing before they got there. This would be a world without school shootings. AR-15s really *would* be just for target shooting. There would be no illness, no cancer, no hunger, no migraines, no sciatica, no ingrown toenails. All of us would always be fine, perfectly self-sufficient, impervious to harm, completely fearless. Sounds idyllic, doesn't it?

But what else would we not have in this paradise? Well, there would be no real need of kindness. What would be the point, if everyone was always fine? Compassion would be illogical. There would be no need to be trustworthy, or to keep your promises, because no harm could come from our dishonesty. Courage would be useless, too, because what is courage except being resolute in the face of danger? In a world without danger, there would be no need for bravery. And there would be no need to grow or learn. After all, why bother learning something new, or developing a new skill, if neither could possibly improve your experience of life. And I can't imagine that there would be any need for love. The experience of loving someone is the

experience of feeling more complete in relationship with that person. But where we are already completely self-sufficient, what would love be about, anyway?

In last week's sermon, I suggested that the reason that God orchestrated a surprisingly low-key resurrection for Jesus was because God *always* does that sort of thing. Throughout nature and throughout the story of scripture, God has always acted by means of the tiny seed, the small suggestion, the flicker of an idea, the least promising person around. God appears to love growth and transformation for their own sake. God does not create anything so that it can be; God creates everything so that it can *become*. God invites us, the created, into the creative process, granting us the ability to participate in the becoming of the world, of those around us, and ourselves. And if that is God's purpose – if God wanted to create a world in which we could learn and grow, and have the opportunity to become creatures of kindness and courage and love – what kind of world might God create? Possibly one like this.

At any rate, that's what we are seeing around us today. God did not invent the Covid-19 virus, except insofar as God created a world in which such things might evolve, but God did create us with the ability to grow in courage and compassion in response to this – or any – crisis. And indeed, some people have become heroes, lighthouses of that courage and compassion, and as we have beheld those heroes, all our hearts have been enlarged. True, others have made . . . different choices. I'll talk next week about that kind of pain – the kind originating not in the external world but in humanity itself. For now, though, as we trudge slowly through our current crisis, we pray not just for deliverance from the pandemic but that in our response to it we may be transformed into something closer to the image of God we were created to be.

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We close again this week with the prayer I continue finding hope in, from the Northumbrian monastic community:

Lord, you have always given bread for the coming day;
and though I am poor, today I believe.

Lord, you have always given strength for the coming day;
and though I am weak, today I believe.

Lord, you have always given peace for the coming day;
and though of anxious heart, today I believe.

Lord, you have always kept me safe in trials;
and now, tried as I am, today I believe.

Lord, you have always marked the road for the coming day;
and though it may be hidden, today I believe.

Lord, you have always lightened this darkness of mine;
and though the night is here, today I believe.

Lord, you have always spoken when time was ripe;
and though you be silent now, today I believe. Amen.