

Faith Mennonite Church – Minneapolis, MN
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“Appropriate” resurrection responses...

John 20:19-31

“Vacuuming and Filing....” said Abbot John Klassen at St John’s Abbey during last week’s Easter homily ... “Vacuuming and Filing....are *not* appropriate responses to the Good News of the Resurrection.”

Abbot John reminded us: “*Some things just keep on coming around, like taxes on April 15, or the opening of the lake and the return of the loons. These are things we can anticipate and either dread or take delight in. But There is a danger that we might begin to treat the resurrection of Jesus in the same way. After all, it comes each year. “O yeah, it’s just Jesus rising from the dead again.”*

They say, hindsight is 20/20, and we see that now....

.... *Easter is not like the inevitable return of spring.*

Easter is about the cataclysmic shattering of the tomb of death.

It is the breaking in of a new world.

Our scripture reading today enters us into the story just when Jesus’ disciples are trying to grasp onto this “new world” reality. Was something “new” happening, or did the most unfair tragedy of their lives just take place?! – the cruel death of their teacher – the one they had given up everything to follow. So unsure were they about what kind of a mess they were now into, that they were together behind locked doors,

it was not a part of *Sabbath* business as usual. They felt vulnerable, confused, there was much cognitive dissonance! full of mystery.... but, neither did they expect *this*: that the friend they watched die several days ago, was alive! and standing among them. Peace! he said, and “pinch me”... I’m real!

Our passage in John today, seems to shine a spot light on several ways to respond to the news of the Resurrection. In the section just before this reading we meet Mary, who has gone to Jesus’ grave and discovers it is empty. She is distraught !

Jean Vanier writes that Mary represents each one of us.

Like her, we run here and there frantically, each one of us alone, feeling empty, wailing and

weeping for a key to peace, seeking a dead body, A Jesus who lived some two thousand years ago¹.

Mary, after hearing Jesus speak her name directly, recognized Jesus was alive.
So too, each of us is waiting to be found and called by our name.

Her response was immediate, she wanted to HUG Jesus, celebrate him. Upon recognition of Jesus, she is SENT. *GO! and respond* to this good news, Jesus says, go and tell the others that I am alive !

Mary, was sent, she went, she told the Good News, she was not taken seriously. Her truth, even among other disciples, was discredited. We discover this because the disciples did not recognize Jesus among them, even though they had heard from Mary he was alive....they didn't see him, until he pointed himself out to them – pointed out his wounds to them, unrecognized as their risen Lord until he became vulnerable among them.

Jean Vanier says:

How is it that Mary...and the disciples now do not recognize Jesus right away ? I think they are blinded by their unfulfilled expectations and their feelings of loss and despair. In much the same way, we can also be blinded by our fears and tears.

Maybe the disciples really had taken Mary seriously ? Maybe they understood that Jesus was alive, but they locked themselves into the house, out of his reach, because they were afraid of him ? Maybe his return, news of his presence, made them self-conscious of all the ways they failed him during his crucifixion ordeal. Perhaps they *so much* understood that he was alive, as he had promised them, that they were ashamed for their moments of infidelity – hiding behind the locked doors of shame. But Jesus, we learn, has the capacity to enter behind locked doors, and bring Peace into places of turmoil, self loathing, and shame. Jesus brings Peace to the turmoil of their lived realities...*an inner peace that flows from his presence.*

He could have pointed out to Peter that he denied him 3 times *..I told you so, Peter...*

He could have scolded him for not being faithful. He could have scolded them all for not being with him during his ordeal of carrying the cross through the streets of Jerusalem, how none of them offered him drink and assistance

– rather , at the time of his worst experience of his life, being crucified, it was outsiders, not his inner circle of friends and followers, who responded to his suffering .

He could have judged them for being fearful, cowardly, abandoning him, not trusting his message, and not taking him seriously. **But Jesus does not make anyone feel guilty.**

Rather he *confirms his choice* of them: *they are his beloved ones and he is there for each of them.*

¹ Vanier, Jean *Commentary on the Gospel of John*. pages 333-346.

...*The Risen Jesus does not appear as the powerful one, but as the wounded and forgiving one.* indeed the prophet Isaiah said: Through his wounds we are healed. (53:5) *These wounds are there for all ages and all time, to reveal the humble and forgiving love of Jesus... Jesus' woundswill bring people together in love.*

Vanier writes: *Jesus comes to all of us through these locked doors and says: Peace to you ! These wounds become the place of mutual compassion, of indwelling [Jesus' presence with us] and of thanksgiving.*

At a level that is deeper than all that is wounded and fearful in us, Jesus reveals that he loves us and forgives us for all our inconstancies.

but John tells us, not everyone had received this Good News.... Thomas was missing. Where was he ? Perhaps he went to the grave to see for himself ? perhaps he had gone to the Temple to pray ? perhaps he didn't want to be with other ashamed people ? perhaps, he felt so alone and isolated in his anger or in his abandonment of Jesus, that he could not bear the vulnerability of others' knowing, nor sharing his pain with them ? Locked doors were not enough for him ? perhaps he wanted to completely isolate himself from all the turmoil he struggled with ? or.... perhaps.... he had already given up on the hope that the followers of Jesus were doing something new? perhaps he gave up on the whole movement ? Perhaps the crucifixion was such a huge disillusionment that cynicism had already taken over, he gave up on the task of the new way of living that Jesus had been forming him in, and he went home ?!

We know from the synoptic Gospels that Thomas is one of the first of the twelve disciples that Jesus had invited to follow him in his public ministry. We learn that he's a bit of a sarcastic fellow. We are first introduced to Thomas, when Jesus' friend Lazarus dies. (John 11). When Jesus insists on going back into danger, back to Judea, to raise Lazarus from the dead.

we hear *a sarcastic word* from Thomas, at this moment, when he says "ooooohhhh ... Let us also go, that we may die with him." (11:16) Jesus does not *react* to Thomas' flippant remark. Later, in Chapter 14 Thomas emerges again in the story. Warning his disciples that his time of leadership is ending, and consoling them, Jesus says "do not let your hearts be troubled..." He assures his disciples that they know "the way to the place that [he] is going." And Thomas responds (with sarcasm again): "Lord, we do not know *where* you are going. – so --- How can we know *the way* ?" (14:5). Jesus responds with his famous statement "I am the way, and the truth, and the life..."

On this 8th day after the empty tomb discovery, the end of the Sabbath day, Thomas returns to the group. What gave him the courage to come back ? to give it one more try ? did other disciples go and find him? did they offer his questions acceptance? did they let him know he was welcome to remain among them, questions and sarcasm, and all? The disciples tell him "We have seen the Lord." But he refuses to accept their testimony, doesn't believe their witness, does not seem persuaded by their air of rejoicing He *doubts it all*.... he describes his own

individual criteria for proof: to “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....” Unless these conditions, these *specific criteria for truth* are met I will not believe it.

I'm not sure his criteria would count as the scientific method, but he wanted observable proof. The words and eye witness accounts of his fellow disciples didn't count, didn't convince him. Previous testimony of scripture and tradition did not convince him. His three year journey with Jesus' teachings, and personal devotion, did not convince him. What gave him the right to discredit all these forms of testimony ? Why could he make his own *personal experience* of Jesus' wounds the only valid criteria for believing the resurrection was true ? *Thomas refuses to believe what all the others announce unanimously ... how dare he !*

Yet, Just as Jesus does not seem to judge Peter's failings, he also does not get upset about Thomas' lack of trust, his need for personal experience as the arbiter for what is truth is honoured. Jesus brings a word of Peace, he does not come up to Thomas and poke him and chastise him for not believing, *even* after Thomas saw Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead; *even* after Thomas walked and ate with him for nearly 3 years; *even* after Thomas had already received the good news from all the others before him that week, *even* though scripture and tradition had been preparing him for the resurrection and messiah. *Jesus responds to Thomas' need and cry, even if this need comes from a lack of trust.* And Thomas `gets it`. He accepts this miracle is true !

Thomas' recognition has brought a Blessing on all of us who come after him. Jesus says *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe...* John Dear calls this the “final beatitude”. That the evangelist “writes for those who come *after*, to those who would take the journey of peacemaking through the ages.”²

Vanier writes: *O happy the fault of Thomas who did not believe, so that our belief may be founded upon his doubts, which called forth this new apparition of Jesus !* The epistle to the Hebrews states; *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.... Heb 11:1*

Thomas' struggle with truth, becomes the occasion for our blessing.

Jesus stands among them and says “Salam alaykum...Peace be with you” and he *invites* Thomas to experience the proof he needs to be able to believe. We are not told that Thomas actually does put his hands in the holes, nor into Jesus' side, however, Thomas *does respond* to this resurrection reality before him! Thomas responds with the strongest Christological affirmation in the New Testament: “My Lord and my God !”

He does not shrug his shoulders and say, “oh yea, it's just Jesus rising from the dead” ... “yeah , yeah He told us this would happen...”

He does not *merely* rejoice, he worships! He responds with immediacy and intensity....the kind of immediate response one gives when in LOVE ! His whole being caught up into wholehearted

² Dear, John. “Doubting Thomas” in *National Catholic Reporter*, April 6, 2010. (<http://74.63.36.138>)

expression As a Jew, Thomas is well versed in the Psalms, and the first thing that comes to his mind is what the Psalmist has been saying for centuries. It was as though Thomas had the perfect song for the occasion right on the tip of his lips! **Psalm 104:1** *Bless the LORD, O my soul. O LORD my God, you are very great. You are clothed with honor and majesty...*

But Thomas' response, also flags the political implications for this new world reality -- the words he utters are Illegal !!! Not only does his response fly in the face of the teachings of the Jewish religious authorities – but also the political authorities! According to John Dear, *these are subversive words, 'My Lord and My God' – that is the title demanded by Domitian, emperor from 81 to 96 CE, the generation in which John wrote [this Gospel]. Roman texts of the era attach the title, word for word, to the emperor. And any other claimant to the title – and his followers – was suspected of treason and subject to arrest.* Reasons to hide behind locked doors and be afraid!

Jesus, accepts that title from Thomas' mouth “My Lord AND My God” ... Thomas, that doubter, he gives the most appropriate resurrection response of all..... ! We learn that “appropriate” resurrection responses include hugs ! running to tell others ! rejoicing ! and worship!

But, there's one more thing that happens in this passage; what seems like a rather quirky insertion into the middle of these stories is found in vs. 22, 23 when Jesus breathes on them, like God breathing life into Adam at creation, Jesus breathes the Spirit into their community. This is a Spirit of wisdom, discernment.. he's equipping them with the tools they need for living their lives in the new world community – a post-resurrection reality is finding a new way forward, and to do so they need an Advocate, a counselor, God's Spirit to guide them – just as the Spirit guided Jesus in his earthly ministry.³

Another part of this new world living includes Forgiving. This strange language of binding on earth and loosing in heaven ... what the???? ---- these were the activities that got Jesus sacked in the first place....always in trouble with the religious authorities, because he was constantly forgiving people's sins claiming the authority to decide on religious matters – – as though what he decided had eternal implications. YIKES, *only trained and ordained religious authorities are allowed* that responsibility and power to decide Who is right with God and who is not – and now Jesus is sending out his disciples, illiterate itinerants to go and do that – Forgive sins, make a religious ruling, with the discernment given through his presence in the Holy Spirit.⁴

³ Coloe, Mary L. *Dwelling in the Household of God: Johannine Ecclesiology and Spirituality*. Collegeville: Liturgical press, 2007. Chapter 9.

⁴ Swartley, *Covenant of Peace*, 320. In Linda Oyer's analysis of John's gospel she concluded that the predominant emphasis of the gospel is that of “the Father's sending of the Son into the world to save the world..and that Jesus' sending of the disciples is to be understood as extending the work of the sent

Once, in a conversation with a young married Muslim woman from Iran, it came up that every night her husband and she would ask forgiveness of each other, for anything they had done to hurt one another that day. They did not “let the sun go down on their anger...” I remember being rather startled, and had to admit that it sounded so *Christian* a thing to do ! move over, I told my stereotypes, Christians are not the only ones who get to practice and define forgiveness and right living in their relationships !

Forgiveness – a *thoroughly* Jewish idea, was being further interpreted by Jesus, post resurrection, – *not* reinterpreted – but given further meaning in the life that the Palestinian Jewish Jesus lived, as God’s son, and as one who repeatedly challenged his religious authorities, the Temple priests, on what God meant by forgiveness of sins. Consistent with his earthly living then, he now appears as resurrected, heavenly being, and empowers ALL his followers to have this capacity – to forgive sins, to decide who is In and who is OUT of heaven !

That becomes part of an appropriate response to Jesus’ resurrection !

To be “the church in holistic mission and peacemaking action.” The being sent out, and the capacity to forgive sins, come together, belong together, are the character of the believing community. Resurrection responsive-ness, is to GO – because we are sent – and FORGIVE – because we are forgiven and because we follow the one who taught us how to forgive – this forgiveness is about being in right relationship with people. It’s all about Reconciliation. These things are one whole. “without mission, there is no peace that reconciles and makes whole; without peacemaking -- discerning, reconciling and forgiving ---- there is no mission that is authentic and worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ....the mission and peacemaking emphases *stand in the service of true worship* of God.”⁵ The Character of this new world Resurrection celebrating living, is all about becoming a Reconciling community.⁶

Christ is Risen ! How do we respond to this bizarre news? Our text today is giving some answers to this question:

like Mary, *Recognize* who Christ is
and let his wounds remind you of the significance of his work on the Cross,
like the disciples, *Rejoice* at the new life that his resurrected presence means for us.
and like Thomas, *Worship the Lord* with all your heart, soul, and mind !

then Go ! *Be Sent* out like Jesus was !
Be empowered by the Spirit,

one..... ‘having been sent’ is the empowering muscle of mission, based in the prior action of the Father and the Son.”

⁶ Yoder, John H. “Practicing the Rule of Christ” in Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics after MacIntyre, ed. Nancy Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg & Mark Thiessen Nation. Harrisburg: Trinity Press International. 132-160.

listen carefully to one another,
and *be Reconciled!* that is.....
Create a new way of being God's people together –
a new kind of *unity* together, modeled by Jesus` life and teaching.

THOSE are appropriate Resurrection responses !

CHRIST is Risen ! respond !