

Hespeler, 19 April, 2020 © Scott McAndless

Acts 2:14a, 22-32, Psalm 16, 1 Peter 1:3-9, John 20:19-31

Every time I read a book or watch a movie these days, I immediately start to correct things in my mind. There are some things in the ways that people behave that just don't seem right anymore. "Well, obviously James Bond shouldn't be standing that close to Blofeld," I'll say, or, "Hey, Lady and Tramp, that strand of spaghetti is not two meters long!" I just find it a little bit hard to reconcile stories that were told or filmed in that long-ago time before we began to practice social distancing.

That is especially true when it comes to reading Scripture these days. I can hardly open the Bible without wanting to correct it and retell the story for the age of Covid-19. So, I have been thinking, maybe I actually ought to write a Covid-19 version of the Bible – to rework Biblical stories so that they can connect more readily with this new normal that we are living with.

I don't mean that seriously. I'm not going to rewrite the entire Bible. But there are some stories that I've come across recently that I just can't help rewriting like, for example, our gospel reading this morning – the traditional church reading every year for this second Sunday of Easter – the famous story of "Doubting Thomas." I just have some very different reactions to the story when I read it in the age of Covid-19. So here is the Covid-19 version of John 20:19-31.

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, the disciples were inside and the doors of the house were locked for fear of the virus. Now, the fact that they were inside and not venturing out except for things that were absolutely essential, was obviously a good thing. Any foray out, especially something that put them in contact with other people in a confined space, only created a risk for community transition. So, their staying in was all very wise and good, but that doesn't mean that all was going well.

In fact, Peter and James – who honestly both had a bit of a tendency to be hotheads – had been getting on each other's nerves a whole lot. James kept asking Peter, "Say, don't I know you from somewhere? Weren't you with that Galilean?" and then, whenever Peter started answering him back, he would just go, "Cockadoodledoo!" Peter was getting so mad that he was turning red in the face. And they weren't the only ones. Nathaniel was getting on everyone's nerves with the way that he jumped at every sound from outdoors and Matthew was spending all of his time reading social media posts and coming up with the



John 20:19-31  
(Revised Covid Version)

most ridiculous viral news stories about conspiracy theories and miracle cures. Philip was just stockpiling essentials like toilet paper and hand sanitizer in one corner of the room and the pile was getting so big that people were tripping over toilet rolls.

Everyone was just on edge. And it wasn't just because they were trapped together in such close quarters, though that didn't help. They really actually liked one another; they had been through a lot together before this. There had been times on those travels around Galilee when they had really struggled. When food had been scarce and there had been no place to stay, it really made them pull together and that had helped them to make it through.

What was different about this situation, what made it different from everything they'd faced together before, was the fear. Their whole world had changed so quickly and so suddenly when Jesus was taken from them. They were left lost, bewildered and, above all, afraid. And fear, especially when you are living in it over an extended period of time, has a way of tearing you down bit by bit until you feel as if nothing at all is holding you together and you might just come apart at any moment. It wasn't the isolation, it wasn't the necessity of sheltering in place that was wearing them down. It was the relentless fear that permeated everything that made them fight and want to hoard things and annoy one another.

And so, when Jesus came and stood among them and did so despite the doors that were locked and barred, he knew what it was that was troubling them. He knew of the fear that was eating away at them. And that was why he said the words that they most needed to hear. **“Peace be with you,”** he said.

Now think for a moment, if you would, about why that would be the first thing that Jesus would want to say. There are other lines, lines that Jesus was kind of famous for, that he could have used at that point. He could have said, **“Be not afraid.”** Lord knows there are many times when that was Jesus' go-to rebuke. Or he could have said to them, as he often did, **“O ye of little faith.”** That would have been accurate under the circumstances. But he went with, **“Peace be with you.”**

The peace that he was offering them was not just about pacifying Peter and James who were practically at each other's throats, though of course that was part of it. But peace, the way that Jesus spoke about it and the way that the Bible speaks about it, is not merely about putting aside disputes. I know that we, rather simplistically, think of peace as what happens when there is no war, but Jesus did not.

The word that Jesus would have used, of course, was the word *shalom*. And in Hebrew, the word *shalom* can be used to mean many things including harmony, wholeness, completeness, prosperity, welfare and tranquility. *Shalom*, in other words, does not refer merely to a lack of conflict but actually to the kinds of conditions that make conflict

unnecessary and unlikely. People who feel whole, complete and see their welfare taken care of will not be inclined to fight with others.

So what did it mean when Jesus entered that locked room wishing peace for the disciples? It meant that he was meeting them where they were, that he could understand what it was that they were struggling with. And since what they were struggling with most of all was fear, he knew very well that that fear was what was preventing them from finding peace.

I realize how hard it is for us as Christians on this Sunday after Easter to not be able to gather together in a building that has been specially consecrated for that purpose to celebrate the resurrected Christ. But remember the disciples of Christ did not have that on the first Easter Sunday nor, as we shall discover as we continue to read, on the Sunday after Easter. They, like you, were locked away in their rooms for fear of what lurked outside. But Jesus came to them where they were, and Jesus brought them peace – Jesus brought them *shalom*.

Jesus comes to you today where you are with that same gift. I know that the situation where you find yourself has not changed and will not change for a while at least. But Jesus has come to you to address whatever is going on in your life that is preventing you from experiencing God's peace *despite* the circumstances where you find yourselves. Jesus comes to you so that you may not be controlled by your fears, for, though these are indeed frightening times, you do have a loving father in heaven in whom you can trust. In that trust may you find peace in your heart even in these times.

So Jesus brought peace to them in their locked room. He brings it to us today as well. He also brought to them the gift of God's Spirit who would form them into the church and who forms us into the church despite the fact that we are separate and apart. He also brought them the gift of forgiveness. No longer would they have to hold onto past hurts, past failures and shortcomings.

But, more than anything, he brought them his presence. Jesus, their Lord, was truly risen and was with them. And that is why when we gather to this very day – even when we cannot gather in body but must gather over the internet – Jesus is right there with us. **“For where two or three are gathered in my name,”** Jesus promised us, **“I am there among them.”** And gathering at a distance is still gathering in Jesus' name.

So Jesus gave the disciples what they most needed on that day, but there was a problem. One of their number was not there. One of them did not receive those gifts of peace, spirit, forgiveness and presence. Where was Thomas? Shouldn't he have been there with the others hiding away behind the locked doors? Well, obviously, at least from our point of view in the post covid-19 reality, isn't it obvious where Thomas was? Clearly he had been deemed an essential worker.

Maybe he was a doctor or a nurse or a grocery store clerk, but, whatever it was, he must have had a good reason to go out into those dangerous streets. Surely we must appreciate Thomas for that, even as we appreciate today those who continue to carry out such vital functions.

But, as I think we've all been realizing, that is an awful strain to put people under. It means you live with a constant stress that has a way of accumulating – building up in your mind and your soul and your body. Thomas, frankly, was exhausted in body and in spirit. And though these people were the closest friends that he had ever had, he was getting short with them. They just didn't understand what it was like to be out there and in constant fear for your own health and wellbeing. They spoke longingly about going out and walking around in public, but he knew very well that not one of them would have changed places with him.

So I kind of understand why, when he finally came back and they told him about an experience that they had had, an experience that had given them a sense of peace, of power and forgiveness and an assurance of the presence of their Lord Jesus that could transform everything, he didn't buy it. After all, he knew that he would have to go out there again. He knew that people would continue to behave badly, how they wouldn't respect social distance and would give little thought to his safety. **“Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands,”** he said, **“and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”**

And I, for one, don't think we ought to be too hard on Thomas for his reaction. It is true that those who go out into to the world these days – and may do so at the risk of their own health and of the health of those they care for – can get hard and cynical. But the amazing thing about the story of Easter is that Jesus came for Thomas too. And he didn't come to tell him how wrong he was or to say “I told you so.” He came with an invitation: **“Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”**

For that is the story of Easter. The risen Jesus meets us where we are. Are we fearful and starting to get on each other's nerves? Jesus meets us there. Are we weary and worn down by living in such times? Jesus meets us there. Are we cynical and doubting because of what we have seen? Jesus meets us there. He comes to us with a simple invitation to believe. And it is not a “believe *that*” – he doesn't merely want you to believe *that* he was actually raised from the dead. He wants you to believe *in* him – to trust in him. When you do that, he has a gift for you, and that gift is peace, shalom.