

He Knows¹
John 20:19-31
April 8, 2018
Northminster Presbyterian Church
Rev. Michael D. Kirby

I'll admit it. I love Easter. The choir singing those big glorious hymns, the organ and the brass practically shaking the stained glass, the fresh faces of folks we see a few times a year, the Peep and Chocolate fueled stupor of the Sunday School aged little ones. Easter is awesome. Waking up the Alleluias and pulling out the bright white parakeets...and then...and then...What's next?

Just like each gospel tells Easter morning differently, each gospel tells the rest of the story differently too. In John, do we find the disciples celebrating Mary's amazing story of her encounter with Jesus in the garden and Peter and John's confirmation that the tomb was empty? Have they dug out their bright and shiny Alleluia's and hired the brass?

Hmmm, according to John, Jesus' followers are hanging out behind a locked door for fear of religious leaders. It does make some sense, though. Those leaders did execute their "friend" just three days ago. As my friend Rev. Kathryn Johnston puts it, in that situation "who wouldn't love the reassuring sound of a deadbolt?"

Maybe Thomas? After all, he's not there. Did he head out to gather a meal for his friends? Did he need to run a little recon to see if it was safe for everyone? Or was he just so exhausted by all of the grief and wonder that he had to get out of that stuffy room and its pleasant pong of fear and worry? We don't know.

We just know that Thomas' world was shattered just three days ago and Thomas is afraid to believe that things can get any better, afraid that there is no one who really understands. The others? Perhaps they were able to share their grief but that is not Thomas' way. He needed to be alone to find a way forward.

The tradition tells us Thomas was a twin and that his twin was not among the other disciples. Perhaps that's where he went, back to the brother or sister who shared his life and now could share his pain, for surely a twin could understand his loss, but could anyone else? It's one of the great conundrums in the world of compassion and empathy. Will the person with whom we share our pain give us back what we need?

Our response to the pain of others typically takes one of five paths: Schadenfreude — pleasure at the pain of others — which we typically reserve for enemies; pity — where we are disturbed by another's pain; sympathy — where we feel for another's pain; empathy — where we actually feel another's pain, and compassion — where we become convicted to do something to end another's pain.

¹This sermon is largely shaped by the work of the Rev. Meg Peery McLaughlin from her paper on this text for the Well in 2010 and the Rev. Kathryn Johnston and her paper on this text in 2017.

I believe that empathy is what most of us need in times of greatest sorrow, at least in the moment — a person who will just sit with us and share the pain. But how painful is it when we experience what I like to call narcissistic empathy? You've experienced it, I'm sure. I sadly have actually committed it, hopefully not since I've known better. Narcissistic empathy is when the person sitting with you says, "I know exactly how you feel" and then proceeds to tell you about a time he or she was in pain that isn't remotely like ours. Sometimes hearing that actually hurts, because clearly they don't, they just don't know. Their rushing to share their own story proves it. And it hurts because this hurt, whatever it might be, is mine. It's my story, my sorrow — unique and singular. No one else can really know what it feels like. Sure, maybe you know what it feels like to lose a spouse, but you don't know what it feels like to lose my spouse. Perhaps you've known what it feels like to look for a job, but you don't know what it means for me, for my family, for my finances, for my ego. Maybe you do know something about cancer because you had a lumpectomy, but you don't know my weariness and worry, you don't know my hot flashes and headaches. *You don't know.*

It is a dilemma, I think, because on the other hand, when we do find the courage to be vulnerable before others, to share the depth of our grief or pain, we *do* crave someone to put their hand on our shoulder, look us in the eye and say, "I know," and just leave it at that. Maybe that's because it is too much to bear — to be the only person who knows what broken-heartedness feels like. *We want someone to know.* We want them to say, "I know that feeling. You're not the only one who has been there in the dark. *I know* what it's like to hurt like this," and for it to be true.

Those who can see that our pain is unique to us, but enough like pain they have known, have earned a right to be with us in those moments. Their hurt becomes their credential for listening, for caring, for companioning us through the valley of the shadow of whatever pain we find ourselves overwhelmed by.

Elisabeth Kubler Ross, who taught us so much about grief, once wrote: "The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen." (goodreads.com)

Perhaps the same is true with God. It was William Temple who said: "the wounds of Christ are his credentials to the suffering race of humanity."²

And Thomas, who wants to see the wounds, seems to know that, because he has suffered the loss of all of his hopes and dreams. Perhaps his demand to see and touch the wounds is his way of demanding to see Jesus' credentials for sharing, and perhaps even lifting, his pain.

Richard Hays, writing in the *Christian Century* puts it this way:

Isn't it curious that God could raise Jesus from the dead but didn't heal the nail wounds in his hands? Was this an oversight? Surely not. The power of death is

² Gench, Frances. *Encountering Jesus*. pg. 138.

conquered but the wounds remain. When Jesus first appeared to the disciples, when Thomas wasn't there, "he showed them his hands and his side." Why? Nobody requested that. He was saying, "Here is my signature." Thomas' instinct was right in demanding to see the marks of the nails and spear. He didn't say, "Unless I see his halo, I'll never believe." He understood that the Christ of faith must be the Jesus who was crucified, dead and buried. Anything else, anything less, would trivialize the struggle, trivialize the power of evil in the world, trivialize the resurrection. The power of death is conquered — the wounds remain.³

Consider when Thomas — lonely, questioning, grieving his friend, scared that his hope has died and all of his friends have gone round the bend in their grief — stands before the Risen Christ. Do they have a theological discussion? Are there questions he wants answered? No, Christ shows him the wounds.

We see the scene and it's as if Jesus holds up his pierced hands and says, "*I know, Thomas.*" He offers his pierced side as if to say, "*Thomas, I know.*" Thomas sees Jesus' calling card for empathy with the pain of all the world and *then he knows* — and out pours his confession, "My Lord and my God!"

As my Well colleague Meg Peery McLaughlin, co-pastor of Burke Presbyterian Church in the D.C. suburbs, puts it: "Thomas is able to utter his creed when he realizes that the Risen Christ *does know how bad it hurts*. Thomas doesn't doubt. That word is never found in the Gospel of John. Rather, he moves from unbelief to belief when he realizes that there will never again be a time when his own pain stands alone — all by its unique self. There will never again be a time when he knows that his hurt will have the last word. When the depth of Christ's suffering dawns on us, perhaps then we will recognize him in our midst."

Can we see him — not simply among us as a fellow sufferer but as one who takes on our suffering, who wills it be lifted from our shoulders, and who seeks to transform suffering in the power of resurrection into new life? Friends, Christ is alive. Christ knows all that we have experienced and in compassion bids us share all with him. And in return he lets us see that there is no pain, no sorrow, no loss that we have experienced that he has not known. Indeed, he took those very pains, losses and sorrows upon himself and put them to death with him on the cross because he didn't simply feel empathy for us, but was moved to that fifth response to pain, compassion — the desire, the motivation to change the circumstances of the one who suffers so as to end that suffering.

We live in the already, but not yet, moment of Christ's resurrection compassion, when victory over all of those sources of pain has been won. But our hearts, our minds, and the world around us are still cowering behind the deadbolts of this world. Our invitation is to seek him out, to join Thomas and all of those who suffer at the foot of the cross, and to hear his eternal "I know" and let him take those burdens from us in hopeful expectation for the day when they are transformed, when we are transformed by his Resurrection hope. Amen.

³ Hays, Richard. "Fingering the Evidence" *The Christian Century*, April 1, 1992.