

John 20 (Grieving Thomas)

Unraveled: Seeking God When Our Plans Fall Apart

July 12, 2020

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For the followers of Jesus, the unimaginable had happened. Their world had been unraveled and there was pain and there was fear. Jesus was violently killed, leaving Thomas and the rest of the disciples alone. It was still the first day of the week. But so much had happened since sunrise when Mary Magdalene discovered Jesus' empty tomb. She was confused and ran to tell Peter and one other unnamed disciple. The two disciples, needing to see for themselves, raced to the tomb and found it as Mary said, empty. They found the linen cloths that Jesus' body had been wrapped in, but his body was not there. The disciples left and went home.

They left Mary outside the tomb crying. While there, she looked in the tomb again, and where Jesus' body had been, she saw two angels. They asked her why she was crying and she said, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." Just as she said this, she turned around and saw a man, who asked her why she was crying and who she was looking for. She didn't recognize the man until he said her name. It was Jesus. He told her to go tell the others and she went to them and said, "I have seen the Lord."

In John 20:19-29, the story continues:

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." ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If 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. ²⁵ So 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." ²⁷ Then 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." ²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

The ancient church viewed the Gospel of John as a supplement to Matthew, Mark, and Luke. They assumed the author of John had carefully read Matthew, Mark, and Luke and wrote his own story as a way of pulling it all together, as kind of a theological interpretation of the other gospels, which they believed were more like history books. We have since learned that all four gospels are a combination of history, metaphors, and interpretation explaining who Jesus was and what his life and death meant more than 2000 years ago. The 4 separate gospels represented 4 separate communities of Jesus followers and their separate interpretations.

If you were to sit down and read the Gospel of John from beginning to end, one of the things you might notice is that the author uses some pretty rich multi-sensory imagery to talk to his community about how he understood Jesus and his message. This down to earth, ordinary-life, imagery reminds us that our faith could be, should be, part of our everyday whole human experiences. God meets each one of us in different places, in different ways. Our belief, and our unbelief, is a product of how we experience the world and how we experience each other and our relationships. Every part of life, every piece of who we are, is an opportunity to believe something about God or to disbelieve it. We experience literally everything through our senses, so that's one of the ways the author of John chooses to help us understand his interpretation of the Christ event.

In chapter 6: taste, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe."

In chapter 11: smell: As the stone from Lazarus' tomb was removed a grief-stricken Martha said, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead

four days.” Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” And Lazarus was alive again.

In chapter 10, hear: Jesus, the good shepherd, calls his sheep by name, they know the sound of his voice and they follow him.

In chapter 13, touch. Jesus washed his disciples’ feet and then said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them...I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he.”

And here in chapter 20, sight: “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.” Even before scientists studied the ways in which humans learn, this author seems to know. Each one of us learns, grows, and experiences life differently and that includes the ways in which we experience the Holy. I hope what we will discover together in this sermon series is that when our plans fall apart, when our lives unravel before our eyes, that there are opportunities for us to encounter God in a new way, to believe something new, to create something new. I hope we will see that things that have been unraveled can be used to make something new.

There is a lot in this post-Easter story, but what I want us to notice right away is that the disciples were gathered first, without Thomas. The text doesn’t say why he wasn’t there, but we can imagine that the events of the days that led up to this gathering...Jesus’ arrest, his sham of a trial, his violent death, the disciples making themselves scarce, we can imagine that Thomas was grieving hard. I’m sure all of them were grieving in their own ways. They had not planned to be grieving the death of their friend. They had not planned for the possibility that they might be expelled from the synagogue and from the Jewish community (that’s why the text tells us the doors were locked and the disciples were afraid). Maybe Thomas thought he was safer by himself. Or did he just want to be alone in his grief?

Whatever the reason, Thomas missed that first encounter with Jesus when Jesus appeared to the disciples and said, “Peace be with you,” and then showed them the wounds on his hands and in his side. Seeing the wounds, the disciples rejoiced and then they believed. For these followers of Jesus, in that moment, seeing was believing. Sometime later, the disciples told Thomas about their experience and

that's when he earned the nickname "Doubting Thomas," which I think is kind of an unfair characterization of him. 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."

A week later, gathered in the same house, this time with Thomas present, Jesus appeared and again greeted them, "Peace be with you." He offered his hands and his side to Thomas. The text doesn't say that Thomas actually touched Jesus. But he saw...and he believed. He cried out, "My Lord and my God." I do want to point out that Thomas didn't ask for anything the other disciples hadn't already received. At the gathering he missed, all the others saw Jesus' hands and his side and then they rejoiced. If Thomas was a doubter, all the disciples were doubters. All Thomas wanted was his own encounter with Jesus. His life was unraveled in so many ways. I can understand why he wasn't willing to expend any energy or risk feeling anything unless he saw Jesus for himself. He was protecting himself from more grief. And I get it.

We are all in the midst of life unraveled. And there is grief, almost suffocating grief. We are grieving the lives taken by COVID-19. We are grieving the ways systemic racism oppresses and kills our Black neighbors. We are grieving what used to be "normal": worshiping in the sanctuary, feeling safe in our classrooms, workplaces, and restaurants, traveling, hugging each other, and going outside without a mask. We are grieving the sense of unity we used to feel in the midst of other disasters. This is not what we had planned.

The story of grieving Thomas comes along to remind us that it is okay, to insist on our own experience, to do what we need to do for ourselves in order to get through this really hard time. It is okay to need something different than you have needed before, from God and from other people. It is okay to long for proof that God is present, especially when everything seems to have come unraveled. But what I want to say to you is *everything* has not come unraveled. This gathering right now is proof of that. This gathering of Jesus followers, some of us overwhelmed by grief and sadness, some of us angry and frustrated, some of us on the verge of giving up, wanting to lock ourselves away from everything and everyone that could hurt us, we are proof that there are some things that are still woven together. We, like Thomas, like the rest of the disciples, like all of the faithful before us, are a mixture of belief and unbelief, each one of us longing to

know that the God who was present in the chaos of creation is still present in the midst of our chaos, in the midst of our unraveled-ness. We gather each week, bringing our individual experiences into this space, and together, we try to make sense of it so that we can offer ourselves to a world that needs us. This community is not unraveled. We are strong together.