

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter  
Sermon 4.11.21

**John 20:19-31**

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.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 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.”

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.” 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.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” 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.” Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. (330)

I caught a headline the other day. Cosmetic clinicians have been enduring a Botox bump. As more people get vaccinated and the prospect of emerging from quarantine comes closer to reality, people are preparing themselves to be seen again.

I get it. Over a year has passed, as we all know, and it’s been a rough one. According to the article, “...the stress, inertia, and (for some) carb-heavy diet of the last year has left many feeling prematurely aged, out of shape, and saggy. That’s led to a boom in cosmetic procedures... RealSelf.com, the ‘Yelp’ for cosmetic surgery, says appointment bookings spiked 71% in October.”

To wit, one clinic in California advertised a treatment entitled “Turn Back Time,” the advertisement copy for which read, “Don’t we all wish to turn back time and cancel 2020!?”

I guess.

It made me think of another headline that caught my eye, this a week earlier. Peter Wehner’s column in *The New York Times* asked, “Why Is Jesus Still Wounded After His Resurrection?”

This seems to be a driving concern in the story we just heard—that though he was resurrected, Jesus’ wounds remained. Real to begin with, not just part of some display of suffering,

not just part of a holographic performance of suffering, these wounds were real as Jesus himself was—real.

Jesus had really suffered and died on the cross. That hadn't been a display. That hadn't been a performance—God, through Jesus, acting *as if* alive amidst this world, which is to say *as if* vulnerable to this world. This wasn't a *show* of empathy or compassion, which is a suffering with. This was real; this was a taking responsibility, acting in real response—to what we face in this world, to what it's actually like to be a creature amidst this creation, a being among beings who longs for true being (freedom, power, goodness) while also being vulnerable, ensnared, terribly limited. This was *really* God made flesh, which is to say made vulnerable to the very world that God had created but hadn't yet perfected, was still yet perfecting. This was *really* God submitting to the world that God had made, in all its splendor and all its sin, to suffer it as we all will or have or indeed do at some point in our lives or throughout our lives. (Some people don't get off as easy as, say, for example, I tend to.) This was God really taking on the sin of the world, becoming vulnerable to the world, so to save the world.

Good news?

Vulnerable comes to us from the Latin *vulna*, which means wounds.

Who knew?

So here we are, with Jesus wounded and us ourselves more wrinkled and saggier than last we saw each other—that is, if we got through COVID year with good fortune. For some people, wrinkles and sags are the least of their worries.

Either way, this year really did happen, and it really was as strange and surreal and sad and insufferable as all that. *I* look worse for it. *I feel* worse for it. I cry a lot. And then I feel the spring sunshine on my face.

It's a place many in the Johannine community didn't want to be.

The community for which this gospel was written, and indeed *by* which this gospel was written, was a discrete community among the earliest days of the church, and they had a discrete library of texts that only later were taken up in the effort to establish a biblical canon. One gospel narrative and three letters, these are the Johannine texts, and they together indicate a people intensely devoted to Jesus crucified as the real abode of God in the world.

The true and manifest presence of the eternal *logos*, Jesus made present and revealed the logic and creative coherence of being within all beings. The many and pervasive paradoxes and contradictions that insist upon themselves when you really get down to it all: they all come to

cohere in Jesus and him crucified. The Modernists, the folks who really sealed the deal for the Modern Era, Kant and Hume and Nietzsche and Hegel, would all go there, in time; and many others as well. They'd all make an attempt at establishing those first things, those grounds of being, that firm ground from which to build up a society, and indeed a metaphysics, a world-view—but from a natural impulse and the power of human reason, pure and free of all fantasy, not from a supernatural impulse and the power of divine revelation. They went in search of secular understandings and underpinnings, not spiritual ones.

They would drill down.

And they'd all come back with more problems than solutions.

They'd insist otherwise; they'd insist they'd managed to formulate a coherent formulation. But the truth is it was all just infinite regress, the need for a first thing prior to the just established first thing. As soon as they stood on what seemed firm ground from which postulate a coherent metaphysics, here came the troubling fact, that this too was but another fiction, a turtle standing on the back of a turtle until you realized it was just turtles all the way down.

So, only this: Jesus as God incarnate and emanate in the world, crucified because of the world, making coherent the world, as if the contradictions of the cross itself, post and cross beam, were the very picture of coherence though amidst contradiction.

Love—as if God Himself were saying to us while we struggle and suffer amidst the world's painful impossibilities, “Sorry about all this,” maybe even, “My bad,” taking it upon himself to die, only then to live, as if we might do the same, or might at least receive of his having done so and, in so doing, have life in his name, life on the other side of death.

Too little, too late, though. Engaging those hard irreconcilables, those elusive but insistent mysteries, at the heart of it all had some in the Johannine community suppose Jesus hadn't *really* come as *real*, and hadn't *really* suffered. The scandal of the assertion that this eternal logic and purpose and coherence, that the very beingness of beings, could come as a being though to suffer the world in all its illogic and contradiction and death-dealing (though in the name of life and safety): this was too much. What it suggested was too terrible. That these painful contradictions would abide, and that God would join us in our having to suffer them, and that by this God would move through them for us so we might as well, move through struggle and suffering and even death (should it come to that) so to have eternal life in his name: this was all too terrible.

Thus, there was an insistent strain within John's community that it *had* all been a big show, that the world was indeed as intolerably nonsensical as it seemed, which God knew and some

people also would now know. So Jesus came from God *as if* real, but he was actually a mere appearance of the real. And this appearance, for those who weren't fooled by it, suggested a way out for them too.

Not through, but *out*. Escape!

Gnosticism. This is the gnostic heresy taking root as it would again and again throughout history, as humans are always looking for a way not to be saved by wounding but to be saved by escape or, barring that, to *feel* saved by illusion or, barring even that, to feel *safe* by illusion or even deception. The way to salvation is “up, up and away,” not “down, down, into the dirt and mire of the world.”

So say the Gnostics.

See also: Gwyneth Paltrow, Alex Jones, and all purveyors of magical elixirs to increase virility and or to turn back time. See also: the wellness industry, apocalyptic cults, Q-Anon, and, as it happens, some in John's community in response to whom came this rather insistent Johannine library, the gospel narrative and the letters that read more like sermons. In fact, this was likely the sin of the world that, according to John, Jesus came to save from. This was likely it: that people want safe illusions, not saving truth; that people want dazzling magic, not grounded truth; that people want a *deus ex machina* to break in and save the day, not Jesus Christ, and certainly not him crucified. Sure, resurrected eventually, but still with those sorrowing wounds.

To see, though, that what will truly save is love of the sort that will take on death: this is to see Jesus and to receive life in his name. And this is why these books of John were written at all: that we might see Jesus as truly the savior and we might receive life in his name.

British anthropologist Mary Douglas, in all her studies, noticed something pertinent here: “...when someone freely embraces the symbols of death, or death itself,...a great release of power for good should be expected to follow.”

This is the conviction regarding Jesus that the Johannine library would insist upon. Arguing with those in the midst of their community that a show would do better than the real thing, John's letters would argue it and John's gospel would illustrate it—as here, with the second appearance of Jesus following his crucifixion and burial.

The first was earlier that same day, which was Resurrection Day. Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene at the garden of the tomb.

There, she stood weeping.

She was aggrieved because the body was missing.

She thought they'd taken it away.

The person to explain to her that they hadn't taken it away: she thought he was the gardener, which just makes sense.

Only when he said her name, "Mary," did she recognize him. "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher.)

But she wasn't to cling to him because he hadn't yet returned to the Father.

Now it was evening of that first day, and Jesus appeared to the others of his group. Locked though they were in likely the same upper room where they'd gathered for their Passover feast and what would come to be remembered as the institution of the Last Supper, Jesus appeared to them in body—as if locked doors were nothing, as if locked hearts were nothing.

And the first thing he did was show them his hands and his side. The first thing he did was show them his wounds—

but not for the reason you think. This wasn't to stir up resentment or a spirit of vengeance: "Look what they did to me!"

That's what you'd think, right? Show someone the wrong that's been done to you and you might get them to fight for you.

But the wounds shown were to provoke something else altogether. This we know because what he said then was something else altogether: "Peace be with you." And with this, he breathed on them the Holy Spirit by which such peace might actually be made—the power to forgive or the power to retain, the power to pour forth or the power to resent. The power was theirs so now the choice was theirs.

The thing is, though, Thomas wasn't there for any of this. Out somewhere, not locked away, he was maybe out getting provisions or was maybe out getting insight into whether the city had by now calmed back down after all the violence of that terrible day a couple days earlier.

Thomas returned eventually; the story doesn't say exactly when. But he likely wasn't as happy to hear the news as the others might have thought he'd be. "We have seen the Lord!"

Naturally, he wanted to see him as well—and for this he's castigated, for this he's gone down in history for his supposed, and apparently shameful, "doubt." But who could blame him for this slightly bitter response? Can you? Can you honestly tell me you'd feel otherwise? "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."

The important thing here, though, is not his “doubt.” The important thing here is the apparent cause of his doubt, the thing he desires to see that would actually answer his doubt: the wounds. Thomas wanted to see the wounds, those shocking, scandalous wounds. Because it’s one thing if Jesus had actually died. It’s another thing if he’d only seemed to have died, if in fact he’d made some amazing escape. (“Up, up and away...” Like Elijah in that chariot of fire!) It’s still another thing (and not different in degree but in kind) if he’d died and he yet now lived, still wounded but evermore alive.

See, God won’t make it so that all of this as never happened. God won’t make it so all of whatever has hurt us, or has battered us, or has broken our hearts or our bodies or our spirits as never took place. God isn’t about turning back time. God is about redeeming time.

And I don’t know if that comes as good news to you. I’ll admit it doesn’t always come as good news to me. I indulge my fantasies of escape as much as the next guy. I entertain ideas of glittering magic as much as I do of grounding, and grinding, grace. I’ll wish for Superman, handsome and strong, just as I know the truer way is Jesus on the cross: I watched that four-hour movie and felt it only went a *little* too long. I haven’t gone with Botox yet, but who knows? I did turn fifty this year...

There’s no erasing this past year. There’s no denying it; worse, to do so is a cruelty to those who’ve suffered it in ways truly undeniable, of whom there are many. Over half a million deaths in the US alone, and every one of those connected to a web of people who’ve lost big this year. We can’t avoid the fact of COVID. We mustn’t deny its tragic playing out. The thing with pandemic is that there’s no escape since nowhere in the world has this not been a crippling problem. There’s only getting through it, and because of Jesus there’s the possibility of getting through it together, in grace, kindness, mercy, love.

That’s where we are: almost through. So, continue to bless the six-foot distance as grace, bless your mask as mercy, bless Zoom as love.

Thanks be to God.