

Stairwell Gospel
Sermon at Brown Memorial Park Avenue
Easter II - April 8, 2018

John 20:17-29

Jesus said to her, “Do not hold onto me, because I have not yet ascended. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

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.”

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Thanks be to God.

It is so good to be with you on this Sunday after. Some of you know that I love these Sundays more than anything. When I started preaching, I loved them because they are the weeks no one remembers, and the pressure was low. My friend loved them because she says they’re the weeks when attendance, like a fever finally breaking, goes back to normal, the extra chairs go back in a closet somewhere, and we can all breathe normally again. In my childhood church, this was the week of cleaning up. I would stand in the education building bagging plastic grass and tiny pieces of construction paper bunny ears, and throwing away all the black and purple jelly beans everyone finally admitted no one was going to eat. In addition to this being a week to clean, it was also a week to breathe for our senior minister who had preached four Easter sermons back to back the week before. At my church, on this Sunday after, this Sunday to sweep up garbage, it was a sure thing that one of our female associates would be in the pulpit. Because of that, it became a kind of mark of sisterhood to step into a pulpit this Sunday after. And so it’s with an extra heap of gratitude to you all that I stand here this morning to wrestle with what it is we do

now that the jelly beans are gone, the world is still full of crucifixions, and the disciples are locking the doors.

Some years ago, I was sitting in the back corner of a divinity school lecture hall, staring furiously at the professor behind the podium. Fifty sets of undergraduate eyes were moving between the two of us, and a hush had fallen over the room. In the silence, I thought back over the last few months. This moment was a long time coming. This professor had on the first day insisted that we refer to God only as Father for the sake of what he called “clarity and correctness.”

The few of you who have heard me string together some words about God already know nothing good could possibly have happened once he and I finally found something to argue about beyond divine pronouns.

After two months of mutually exchanged pointed questions and side glances and eye rolls, we found it. By then, it had grown into one of those proxy arguments. You know, when you’re yelling about an open cereal box on the counter, even though you both know it’s not really about the cereal. Our cereal was 3rd century Trinitarian theology. Five minutes into the heated back and forth, I had run out of five dollar words to use and so I tried to pivot to a story – one I knew well – about a monastic leader in Late Antiquity, a sister of a prominent church father I knew this professor knew. I said, “Macrina’s life proves to us that...”

He raised his hand to interrupt me: “Miss Lewellen, you will please refer only to real theologians in my classroom. Leave your women outside.”

INSIDE THE ROOM

I’ve been listening to this story about Thomas for years. And for this whole time, I have heard it told one way. I’ve heard a story about the kind of faith Jesus asks of eleven men behind a locked door *inside* the Upper Room.

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. Inside the room, ten men gathered out of fear. And for good reason. Inside the room, I imagine that they sat huddled together, speaking in hushed tones, breathing shallowly, quietly, wondering how long it would take for word to get back to the religious authorities that Jesus’ body was missing, wondering if they would be arrested next, stopped on the street and questioned, taken away. Surveying the crucifixion landscape around them, they told each other it would be better to stay inside.

Especially here, inside this room, where just a few days before they’d all been together. “Take and eat,” Jesus had invited them. “Drink this cup. There is a new covenant.” He’d washed their feet, and given them hope, and now he was dead and his body was gone. Judas was dead too. Thomas was missing in the city somewhere. They all were shaken. And so they closed the door and they sat there afraid. They sat there until Jesus walked inside the room and gave them a little air to breathe. “Peace be with you,” he exhaled.

Inside the room, Jesus reminds them of what he promised was ahead. They had work to do. He reminds them of the authority they hold. And with the Spirit hovering where the air had grown stale, he reminds them they won't go alone. They remain inside for another week.

Inside the room, Jesus arrives again, and according to tradition, scolds Thomas, who has shown up on time, for inadequate belief. He invites Thomas to reach out and touch him before saying, "Have you believed because you've seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

In commentaries written by our beloved forefathers, this post-resurrection story proclaims what real faith is. Jesus reveals that real faith begs for no explanation, that real faith comes without seeing or touching. Inside the room, this is one final altar call before we barrel toward Pentecost.

It's a compelling story, but I always found it to be a little strange. I've never been great with inconsistency, and so I wondered why Jesus would scold Thomas for wanting to see him after Jesus had showed up not once but twice the week before. He was so intent on Mary recognizing him that he'd stayed in the garden, so intent on the disciples knowing him that he stayed in the room last week. We had a whole celebration about it last week. There were flowers and musicians and alleluias. Inside the room, it seems Thomas is being yelled at for doing the thing we were so excited about seven days ago by the tomb.

"Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe," Jesus declares.

It doesn't make sense. There are any number of ways we could try to stay inside with these men and bend Jesus' words into logic, but as long as we stay locked in with them, we'll miss something and *someone* important.

There's so much happening inside these four walls of the Upper Room that it's easy to forget that there's anything happening outside. That's the point of locking the door. "Stay out," it says. "There's too much in here." The high drama of the moment pulls us inside the room. We stand with Thomas and the other men, to pay attention with laser focus on the point where his hand reaches for Jesus' wounded side. We draw closer and closer, so close that we ourselves could touch it. Our line of sight becomes so narrow that we forget that the door and the walls are actual doors and walls, and not just there to contain the scene. We stare so intently at these two men that we sort of forget how doors work - forget that they have two sides with something happening on both - in this case, an Upper Room that we know well, and a stairwell we have always forgotten. We stare so intently at these two men that we forget that while locking the doors certainly served to keep the men closed in, it also left the women outside.

"How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!" sings the Psalmist.

They left the women outside.

OUTSIDE THE ROOM

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. And from the stairwell, her fist pounding on the door, I can hear Mary shouting, “I have seen the Lord! Jesus is alive.”

Just before verse 19, on the other side of the text, Mary meets Jesus in the garden. She finds him, doesn't recognize him, then does, and embraces him. It's different from Mark's gospel. Not everyone flees. Some of them stay and weep. And so she, in that moment in the garden, becomes the first to reach out and touch this resurrection.

From there, Jesus sends her to spread this good news. Who better than the one who knows resurrection in her bones – not just because she held it in her arms that morning, but because she bears it in her body all the time. She knows what it is to be buried and alive, to be erased by someone and still exist, to be made absent by another's fear or hatred and to still be present in the world. She knows the strangeness and resilience of new life, knows what it is to be sealed in a tomb, and with wounds still raw, find a way out into the garden.

Mary runs to the disciples and declares, “I have seen the Lord.”

And then we lose her. In our imagination and our interpretation, we lose her. The door slams shut in her face, we all go home, and come back in a week to pick up with Thomas. The two stories are really one story, but they are sliced in two by a section heading and a tendency to forget that people, especially women, don't vanish when they stop speaking in scripture.

We leave her outside. They leave her outside. From the stairwell outside the room, Mary Magdalene can hear as they debate what she has just told them: “Can this woman be trusted? Can it be true? Is she just grieving and seeing things?”

The hours pass, and suddenly there's a noise in the room. She hears the disciples encounter what she had witnessed that morning. She hears them rejoice, hears the Spirit melt some of the tension out of the air, hears Jesus remind them that they have authority and tell them they need to start moving outside the room.

She is sure they can't doubt her story now. Jesus has all but kicked them out the door. He leaves, and they stay.

And Mary is still in the stairwell.

Later that night, Thomas comes in late, barreling up the stairs past Mary. She starts to tell him what she knows, but he's already pulling the door shut. The ten others tell him everything, “We have seen the Lord! And so has Mary.” But Thomas is still afraid. He still doesn't trust them. “No,” he says. “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and put my hand in his side, I will not believe.” And so they sit there inside the room.

A week later, Mary hears again Jesus speaking to the disciples. She listens through the door as Jesus says to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Centuries of insistence that it is by faith alone that we know anything about God, and that faith is knowledge dropped into our individual heads from on high, blocks up our ears as we listen to him, but Jesus is an awful Protestant.

"Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen me and still came to believe."

Jesus isn't asking us to close our eyes, isn't asking us to believe without anything to hold onto. He puts Thomas' hand in his side. Jesus is asking us to believe, to accept as truth, what Mary said. "Go, and tell the disciples everything," he told her. And she did.

Have you believed because you've seen me? Why did it take *you* seeing me? Your sister told you everything you needed to know to believe without seeing me yourself. Blessed are you who embraced the word of a woman without having to confirm it "just in case" she was crazy. Blessed are you who believed without demanding verification, who did not insist that you see for yourselves what she said was true. Blessed are those who have not seen me and yet have come to believe that I am alive.

This isn't really a story about Thomas doubting Jesus. This is a story about Thomas doubting Mary. This is a story about Thomas refusing to believe the word of a woman even though she'd held in her hands what he so desperately wanted to know. This is a story about truth and who we trust - or do *not* trust - to tell it.

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.

STAIRWELL GOSPEL

That is surely good enough news for Thomas today, for those of us who have heard a word proclaimed and refused to believe it, who heard good news shouted at us outside and walked away, who were so afraid we missed new life right under our nose. There is good news that so many remained with him while he sorted out what he needed, while he was still reeling from walking through this crucifixion landscape. There is good news that truth is stubborn, that while he doesn't let Thomas off the hook for doubting his dearest friends and companions, Jesus gives him something to hold on to. He makes room for him to be there.

But there's good news this morning is for Mary Magdalene too. For the woman who did what she was called to do and persisted even when fear locked the door on her.

Maybe a month after our lecture hall argument, my professor approached me on the street. He said he was worried about me, and the handful of women who had started referencing feminist thinkers in their papers since that day in class. "If you don't work inside the walls of tradition," he said, "you will never survive in the church."

It is tempting for those of us who cringe at Mary's exclusion, for those who know the sting of a door slammed shut, to think that good news for Mary is that Thomas might recognize her authority and let her inside - that she might get a seat at the table inside the room.

But she knew and Jesus knew that the truth the disciples were looking for was never inside. We can try to look into the Upper Room for that hopeful word, we can try to gather inside here, but good news rarely comes to us from behind a lockable door. New life is hard to preach when fear has us by the throat, and good news can't survive long without air to breathe.

Like any good post-resurrection story, new life was outside the whole time. It was never in the tomb or in the upper room. It was out - in the garden, on the road to Emmaus, out on the water, out in the stairwell.

Our most radical act of faith in the face of crucifixion and in response to the gospel echoing the in the stairwell is to trust that word even when we cannot see the new life behind it, and to unlock the door - not to let Mary inside, but to follow her out.

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.

And blessed are those who proclaim what they know is true from the stairwell that we might come to believe.

Amen.