
This Blessing is Yours

John 20:19-31

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 19, 2020 by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

You are well aware, I'm sure, that in recent weeks there has been a run on Lysol, Clorox wipes, hand sanitizer, hand soap, and toilet paper. What you may not know though is that also occasionally in short supply has been sidewalk chalk. Perhaps this is a surprise to you, but your neighbors and mine have been buying up sidewalk chalk for their children and for themselves. People have not only been using this chalk to give them something to do when the options for entertainment and diversion are sparse. They've also been using the chalk to communicate with neighbors, loved ones, and others they have not been able to be with in traditional ways.

Early in April, NBC shared a story about people using sidewalk chalk to "transform concrete into a canvas of hope." The story told about people communicating everything from the practical to the inspirational with their messages. Some of these included: "Better days ahead;" "Big hugs;" and "It won't always be this way." In Durham on the American Tobacco Trail, one caring neighbor drew two hearts, six feet apart on the trail. And in between the hearts the person wrote, "Love is in the space between us." This practical and powerful reminder to maintain social distance speaks to the way that in this season of life maintaining distance is an act of love, and love is what fills the space of that needed distance. "Love is in the space between us."

I'm not sure if Thomas, the disciple called the Twin, would be on board with this statement. Distance late on Resurrection Sunday was not at all what he needed. The space between him and the resurrected Lord was troubling at best and relationship crushing, which is to say unloving, at worst. For some unknown reason, Thomas was not with the other disciples tucked away in a locked room at the end of the day. Earlier that day Mary Magdalene proclaimed to the disciples that Jesus had appeared to her in the Garden in the dawn of Easter morning. The disciples' response to her glorious testimony was to shelter in place. This was no stay at home order; it was an act of sheltering in place—like you might do if a storm is headed your way or there is a real and imminent, violent threat in your neighborhood. The disciples locked themselves in the room out of fear of what might happen to them once others realized that Jesus was missing from the tomb. And right into their midst, Jesus showed up. The one who is the door to eternal life was not stopped by fear's locked door. Instead, Jesus came among them bearing the marks of the holy hell he had been through and showing them his nail-scarred hands and his spear-pierced side. To those gathered disciples, the crucified and risen Christ spoke peace, breathed the life of the Spirit on them, and called and empowered them to be a community of forgiveness.

Yet Thomas was missing. We often call him "doubting Thomas," but perhaps better would be to call him "missing Thomas." He missed the wonder, joy, hope, and relationship created by the Savior showing up on Resurrection Day offering a personal and experiential encounter to those in the room. Perhaps you feel like you missed this Easter experience, too. For some unexplainable reason, you too just weren't in the room. Oh, you probably watched one or several Easter services, but the experience and encounter just didn't happen for you. And now a week later, you are wondering why nothing seems to have changed either with your external circumstances or your internal disposition. Perhaps many of us feel deep within some of Thomas's struggle today. Perhaps you long to touch or be touched, to see or be seen by someone who carries in his or her

own being God's demonstrable love. And today you find yourself needing Jesus to reveal himself again, so you might believe. Well you are in good company today with "missing Thomas."

When Thomas finally joined the other disciples as one late to the party, he struggled to believe what the other disciples told him. He needed something more. He needed his own encounter, his own experience, his own opportunity to see and touch the Lord. What he needed was the same thing each of the other disciples had already been given. The other disciples had a chance to "see the mark of the nails in Jesus's hands" and to look at, perhaps even touch, his side. It wasn't too much for Thomas to ask the same. Jesus's ministry, after all, had been entirely human and incredibly sensory. Jesus' ministry had been all about the touching, tasting, seeing, and smelling that opened the way to believing—so why not expect a fully human, sensory experience with the Savior for Thomas, too?

Thomas, like the other disciples, didn't simply need proof that Jesus was more than a ghostly vision. He, like them, didn't simply need proof that Jesus was raised bodily from the dead confirming that Jesus was who he said he was. Thomas, like the others, needed a personal encounter that demonstrated to him that Jesus remained in touch with the wounds of the world and connected to the horrors of humanity, even while transforming them into something new. Thomas needed the one who claimed to be the eternal and everlasting "I AM" to hold eternally within himself this woundedness. For Thomas, the space between felt more like a gash in the bonds of their relationship than it felt like holy love. So he said, "Unless I put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." No space between. Hand in the Lord's side. Finger in nail marks. Touching again his beloved. Then believing. Then Thomas will believe the God-man who died to show his love.

A week later, the second Sunday of Easter, Jesus showed up again to the disciples and Thomas was with them this time. Again, Jesus breathed his peace on them. "Peace be with you." Apparently, even those believing disciples needed a reminder of Jesus's abiding peace that passes all understanding. I suspect we need the reminder occasionally, too. Then Jesus turned to Thomas and offered him just what he needed. "Touch my hands." "Touch my sides." "Do not be unbelieving. But believe." Jesus did not offer a dogmatic formula or a creed or a statement of faith to which Thomas should give assent. Jesus did not ask, "Do you accept the fact I've been raised from the dead?" And then wait for his affirmative response. No, he offered Thomas something far more life giving. Jesus offered Thomas the opportunity to confess a relationship marked by Jesus providing just what Thomas needed. Believing is about "having your own encounter with the [living] Word made flesh."¹ And after his encounter Thomas exclaimed, "My Lord and My God." Thomas affirmed the reality of his relationship with Jesus: *My Lord. My God.*

What Jesus spoke next wraps us, and all those who have followed after Thomas, right into this story. Jesus said, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Blessed. You who have somehow believed even after Jesus has gone to sit at his Father's right hand, you are blessed. This blessing is yours. Blessed. You who have not been able to put your hands in Jesus' side or your fingers in the nail holes and yet have a relationship with the Lord, you are blessed. Blessed. You who experience deep within your soul God's love for you in spite of longing for a touch or a sight of the Lord, you are blessed. Of course, the space between us and our Lord doesn't always feel like love or blessing. At times, this distance feels greater than we can bear. At times the distance feels like a wound, and the struggle to

¹ Karoline Lewis, a working preacher article.

find signs of resurrection life is immense. Nevertheless, you've come to believe, and Jesus says, "you are blessed."

But perhaps that isn't all there is to the story. In the most matter of fact sense, those who first received John's Gospel writings and all those after have not seen or touched Jesus's resurrected body. In the most matter of fact sense, Jesus has not shown up in the middle of disciples to be physically touched and seen since he ascended to be with his Father. But in a broader and equally real sense, Jesus has not left us merely to give assent to some facts about an intangible and disembodied Savior. No. Personal encounter and receiving just what we need remains essential to a relationship with the God who in Jesus came to be with us.

Earlier in John's Gospel, Jesus told his followers, "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father" (John 14:12). Jesus proclaimed that the community of belief will continue because his work will continue in the love enacted by his Spirit-filled followers. Jesus said, "Just as I have loved you, so you should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35). Through his disciples, through the community of people whose encounter with the Lord resulted in a relationship of deepening trust, Jesus continues to show up—nail-scarred and spear-pierced—to reveal his love, even in the space between us.

At the end of the story, the Gospel writer adds an editorial note that speaks to how Jesus continued to be present among his disciples in ways not recorded in the scriptural account. "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." Jesus did many other signs not written in this book. The living Christ does many other signs not written in this book. Through the community of his followers, Jesus continues to do other signs, so that many may come to confess a relationship with him—the very relationship that gives life: abundant, eternal, and blessed.

I have not placed my hand in Jesus's literal side or looked upon his actual nail-scarred hands, but during this time where the space between us is a demonstration of our love, I surely have witnessed our living Lord doing many other signs not recorded in this book, and I've been blessed. The crucified and risen Lord did many other signs when the Congregation family waved their fern-come palm branches in a proclamation of praise on Palm Sunday before pacing the pavement that afternoon in a virtual CROP-hunger walk to raise money and awareness for our community and world's neediest neighbors. Blessed. The crucified and risen Lord did many other signs when a Duke religious life group decided to give a surplus of its ministry funds to the furloughed workers of an eatery they regularly frequented on Duke's campus. Blessed. The crucified and risen Lord did many other signs when a sewing Congregation member and a concerned Chapel staffer recognized the need for cloth masks for a broad range of people; these two helped inspire another Durham church to provide over 400 masks in two weeks for food co-op workers, prisoners, guards, and prison chaplains, cancer patients, and hospital social workers, just to name a few. Blessed. The crucified and risen Lord did many other signs when last Sunday, congregation members called one another to pass the peace of Christ across the spaces that separated them. Blessed. The crucified and risen Lord did many other signs in the presence of those who are looking for love in the space between us; signs I have not recorded in this sermon. Blessed.

You have witnessed signs like these, too. You've even been part of them. Perhaps you too have been blessed by these signs as they've strengthened your relationship with the God who gives life in Jesus's name. Perhaps they've provided for you the nail-holes to touch and the wounded side to feel. And though these signs are not written in John's Gospel, they may well be the good news story you need to hear and share. They may well be the very blessing desperately needed by those looking for the Crucified and Risen Lord. And as we share stories of these signs, and as we see and hear the way God's people demonstrate Christ's love, Thomas's words may well form on the lips of many, perhaps even on mine and yours, in a deeper proclamation of belief: "My Lord and My God!"

Amen.