

The Power of the Resurrection: Jesus's Invitation
April 18, 2021 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: John: 20: 19-31

Friends, here we are already on the third Sunday of Easter. Yet, it was only two weeks ago we proclaimed together the words “Christ is Risen”... here in this sanctuary and through cables and routers, across screens from our many upper room sanctuaries...

Living words that meditated our hearts and ever so gently pumped the power of new life and hope and joy through us in each heart beat...

That day – that holy day - I felt those Halleluiahs reverberate throughout my body, the joy rush through my fingertips. Especially when I witnessed a whole lot of our faces on the screen singing together, Christ the Lord has risen today.

Even with all that power and energy and enormous love... It's amazing how quickly I returned to my routine. I woke up on Monday, grabbed a cup of coffee and my laptop and opened up my to do list. My mind already into the next week. Grateful, yes, full yes, AND in the motion of what was to come and what I needed to get done.

Robinson Pyle's trumpet and Peter Sykes's organ– unbelievable music that filled this space with divine energy and hope – slowly began to form a sacred memory that was yesterday. That was now two weeks ago.

Time moved forward. As it does every year. And that's not a bad thing. We move through a liturgical cycle. And yet I remind myself that we are still very much in Eastertide. This is still a resurrection moment. Even two weeks after Jesus left that tomb.

As I read our passage today I found the words transporting me back to two weeks ago to our service... And do you know what was the first memory that

came to my mind? Sarah's conversation with one of our younger and wise Sunday school students – Lorraine. Acknowledging that Easter is mysterious, Sarah asked Lorraine, do we understand how Jesus came back to life? Lorraine confidently answered: nope.

Lorraine thank you for speaking truth and wisdom.

There IS so much mystery and no I do not understand it. I know intellectually Jesus died and on the third day rose again. He returned to his community like he said he would. Showing us that nothing is stronger in this world than God's love. I can read biblical commentary after biblical commentary, theologian after theologian and still not *really* understand this mystery. What does the resurrection mean for us? Our call as Christians? How do I just return to my everyday life after hearing such profound powerful news? What does that resurrection mean that Monday after Easter? Two Sundays into Eastertide?

Am I supposed to be doing something more? Am I supposed to feel something deeper within my bones beyond that holy day of Halleluiahs... when I would inevitably return to my to-do lists...when my fingers would return to the keyboard...What does the mystery of the resurrection mean in between the emails, phone calls, grocery shopping, cleaning, meetings, bills... reading the news...

What does it mean when -ten days after a glorious proclamation, ten days after celebrating the news that Christ is Risen-... we hear about another ... another black man... Daunte Wright... shot and killed by a police officer. For simply being black. Another young beautiful life with a whole future before him.

What does Christ's resurrection mean as we await to hear the verdict of Derek Chauvin's trial? And as police shootings continue to amount even during his trial. Michael Leon Hughes shot and killed. Adam Toledo, just thirteen years old shot and killed.

What does Christ's resurrection mean today? Two weeks after Easter? What does it mean when our hearts grow more and more tender.

Our scripture today tells us Jesus arrives to meet us right here in that tenderness, in that vulnerability, in that grief... He meets us, and he says, Peace be with you.

With our hearts broken.... Jesus says, Peace be with you.

With a heaviness that sinks us deeper into this earth....Jesus says, Peace be with you.

Greeting us, greeting his disciples with this warm, gentle *peace*. The disciples afraid, hide behind a locked door.

They do not know what to do, where to go. They abandoned Jesus, betrayed him... And then Jesus was crucified. And he died. In the midst of their guilt, their sorrow, their fears, their doubts, their hopes, Jesus meets them right there to say - Peace be with you. He breathes and says receive the Holy Spirit.

Receive.

The disciples then share this good news with the one disciple who was not present – Thomas. And Thomas wants and needs to see this for himself to believe...to believe it was really Jesus who returned. That it was really Jesus who extended this peace to them.

Now, I know there is usually a lot of emphasis on Thomas and his doubt. Although this doubt is not just unique to Thomas. In the Gospel of Luke, it is the women – Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, who found the tomb empty... and there at the tomb they were met by two men that gleamed like lightning that told them Jesus had risen from the dead.

The women then went out to tell the disciples, but the disciples did not believe the women. They needed to see for themselves.

So, we do not just see it in Thomas. The disciples, the other eleven had their moments of doubt. Yet Jesus meets them. In Luke, we read that Jesus appears to the disciples -as they were gathering, talking about his resurrection and trying to make sense of it all – and greets them - much like this account we read in the Gospel of John today.

Today, we see Jesus meeting Thomas.

With the gentlest of presences. A peace be with you.

Knowing that Thomas needs the reassurance of a touch, Jesus invites him to place his finger on his hands. To feel them. To bear witness to the holes in his hands from when he was nailed to the cross.

And Jesus tells Thomas to not doubt but believe.

Perhaps saying... Do not doubt that I ever left you but believe that I am always here.

And I think it is even possible to read this passage as not just providing “proof” so that Thomas believes... because maybe it is not all about doubt or belief, but about an invitation. An invitation that holds Thomas in his vulnerability. An invitation that opens the doors for Thomas to receive the grace of God. To reach out as he is able. To feel, with a touch - the power of resurrection.

I asked a dear friend if I could share a conversation she had with a brother at Saint John the Evangelist – an episcopal monastery here in Cambridge. In one of our divinity school classes, we were talking about our prayer lives. My friend vulnerably shared how she feels like she can never pray “right.” She cannot sit still because she easily gets distracted and then is hard on herself for when she looks around – it looks like everyone else seems to have this serene experience with prayer.

And so, she shared what one of the brothers from SSJE told her when she confessed this – Jesus WANTS to be with you in these moments. Those moments of self-doubt, of self-criticism, of not knowing if you are doing the right thing or on the right path... He is reaching out to you. In fact, he is especially reaching out to you in those moments... those moments when you are holding that big box of greasy delicious pizza that you just want to dive your mouth into... standing there in your underwear with unwashed stringy hair. Yes, Jesus wants to be there with you. He wants to be invited into your home.

He wanted to go back to the disciples again, just so he could meet with Thomas.

In all of your humanness, Jesus wants to meet you. Not just in the moments when you can sit still, when you feel like you get it together, when you crank through those emails, exercise and eat spinach. But the moments – yes, especially those moments – of vulnerability. When we are not even sure what we need. Jesus wants to meet you and wants to say peace be with you.

Those pandemic days when all you can seem to do is shower and that is a big accomplishment of the day. Jesus wants to meet you right where you are at and say, peace be with you.

Not to change anything about you. When Jesus meets Thomas, he does not expect Thomas to think differently, he does not question him in his place of doubt. In fact, he invites Thomas to touch him (which is exactly what Thomas needs and we know that because Thomas just said a verse earlier “unless I put my finger in the mark of the nails, I will not believe).

And Jesus says - yes place your finger on my hand – and in doing so Thomas receives the good news of the resurrection. Good news that has not necessarily overpowered the Roman Empire, but has resurrected new hope, that has laid a foundation for new beginnings, that has shown the power of God's love. Jesus is still with them, still with Thomas, even after death.

There is much to be done in Cambridge, this nation and this world. Every black or brown person who is not able live their whole life as God intended- is one too many lives lost. And I do not mean to suggest that Jesus is calling us to inaction today – I believe Jesus wants to meet us, so he can tend to our souls. So, he can tell you I am here. No matter how much hope or faith we have in that moment. He will meet us with no judgement or anger. -All so that we may receive God's grace and love. So that when we do act and respond to all that is happening, we do so with God at the center.

We can see a similar invitation in Gospel of Luke when Jesus meets the disciples to say: "See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; touch me, and see, for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have." (Luke 24:39b).

Again, I am not sure if this just about providing the disciples “proof,” but about an invitation. An invitation to remind us that Jesus is not unreachable. The Risen Christ is not far beyond our hands, outside our homes, but is right here.

This is what I think the power of resurrection can mean today. Death never took Jesus away. Even two thousand years later... even if we lock that door...he will greet us with – peace be with you.

Even as we hold really hard news...even when we hit rock bottom... even when we are on top of the world.

Jesus wants to meet us... right where we are. In your pajamas with coffee stains... his invitation has no barriers. Christ does not rank favorites among his disciples... at different times they all doubted, they all abandoned, betrayed...and yet none of that matters. Christ meets them and says, peace be with you.

Christ meets us not just, so we can see him with our hearts, but so that we can receive God's love, warmth and grace. So, we can feel the presence of the Holy one within us.

Blessed are the ones who have not seen, and I would say: Blessed are all of you... for you have received an invitation. You have received the breath of the Holy Spirit. You have received the good news that Jesus wants to meet you.

May the peace Jesus shares carry you through. Carry you through to a new day. Carry all of us to an imagined kin-dom of justice and mercy. And yes, even carry us out of our beds on a dreaded Monday morning.

May we remember that Jesus's invitation is always here – it will never go away. Jesus is not going anywhere.

This is the power of resurrection that we can always turn to. Well after Easter. Well after even Eastertide... well into our everyday lives, schedules and to-do lists... Jesus's invitation is here for each one of us.

In doubt or faith. Does not matter. In hope or despair. Does not matter. Locked or unlocked doors. Does not matter.

This invitation is yours. To hold on to and cherish. To receive when and as you are able. To receive not just on Easter day but over and over again...as much as you need. This invitation is yours. Peace be with you.