

“Must be present to win?” (8Apr18)
John 20:19-31

There’s a lot in this passage. It’s John’s version of Pentecost, and also of the Great Commission, his culmination or final clarification of the story. The believers receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and are sent with the power that God alone could have, with forgiveness and grace. Oh, and the small detail that the risen Jesus appears behind locked doors to offer greetings and blessing.

But for all of that, we are still most drawn to Thomas, this one who missed out and then is struggling to believe.

This is a standard story for this 2nd Sunday of Easter, since it’s set today. Or at least the second part is. In the first, the followers of Jesus were together on Easter evening. After hearing the morning’s news from Mary Magdalene that Jesus was risen and had come to comfort her and wipe away her tears and reassure her faith, after that Jesus’ followers for some reason evidently decided it was a good time just to lay low, to hide out, to linger behind locked doors.

Before we get to Thomas, let’s pause with that fearful crew trying to barricade themselves in, pause to ponder: Why does the resurrection make them *more* afraid and not less? Is it supposing that the authorities who couldn’t kill Jesus and keep him dead will come after them instead, since they might be easier to bump off?

Or are they actually afraid of this newfound power? That the good news of life somehow becomes for them bad news? That precisely no longer having anything to fear from death means that they *should* be encouraged to stand up and confront the deadly powers and violent authorities? Does having the assurance of hope, the promise of nothing to lose actually seem riskier?

Or is it confining that they would not want to share this good news? Is it easier to keep enemies *as* enemies and not have to face the possibility of reconciliation, not have to see that forgiveness and God’s love could be for those we’d prefer to despise or keep ignoring? Did it all get too big,

that they liked the teachings of Jesus, but actually having him as the Lord and Creator of life means having to share more broadly than we’d selfishly want? It’s not a very desirable commissioning, to be sent back out to those who would oppose you or cause you worry, with a message that God desires better life for them, along with you.

But against that trying to stay secluded, to keep others at bay, Jesus broke through the locked doors and won’t allow belief or blessing to stay cooped up and so directly sent them out. For these followers stifled in anxiety and sorely at odds with those around them, Jesus speaks peace: peace for them, and peace to share.

Already what I hope you’re hearing, then, is Jesus showing up to confront and fulfill the deepest need, meeting people, restoring them, and expanding it still further. It’s about life continuing. He did it with Mary, isolated in her grief, and sent her instead with good news of relationship. He did it for those trapped followers, in sharing and spreading peace and reconciliation.

Then we get to Thomas. Thomas who missed out. Thomas who wanted to believe about the resurrection. Thomas who needed the good news. Thomas who longed for Jesus.

Now, we don’t know why Thomas wasn’t there Easter evening...if it was an excused absence...where he was instead. Maybe it was that his grief or his fear was so intensely isolating he just really needed to be alone by himself. While I don’t disparage that—and can deeply feel that introverted need myself—still we have to notice that in this case it came with liability: if Thomas wanted to be alone, it left him separated from the rest of the believers.

For them, even though they also were sad and scared and all of that, still being together as community was the right place to be, as it enabled the chance to receive the Holy Spirit’s reassurance and encouragement. That is a valuable note about our practice of community here: it is risky to be away, since this is the surest place to meet Jesus, as we’ll hear, to be able to receive blessing and good news and what you need.

Maybe Thomas just happened to miss out. One of my colleagues liked to suggest he was out on a falafel run, picking up some supper to go for the rest. So maybe it was an errand. Maybe he thought the gathering was pointless, not worth his time. Maybe he had a conflict on his calendar and wanted to be with the believers but couldn't, and made the hard choice to go with his previously scheduled programming. Maybe you were still on spring break last week and missed our Easter gathering here. Maybe you awaited guests and felt the obligation to them instead. Maybe it was just...something else. There's always another place you could be and may even *want* to be, other good things happening.

Still, it's worth observing that Jesus didn't encounter Thomas in those other places, wherever else he was. Or, perhaps to say it better: Thomas didn't encounter Jesus. Jesus knew what Thomas needed; as soon as he came into the room he was addressing Thomas's request. So we could presume that Jesus might have been trying to find Thomas, to deal with his concern and meet his need the whole rest of the week.

I'd say it's reasonable to expect that Thomas encountered the risen Jesus as the lady behind the counter at the falafel shop. And amid the crowds he was passing in the marketplace. And Jesus probably showed up in the hotel clerk on spring break. And was pumping gas by an off ramp. He arrived amid the awaited guests, and also outsiders kept at bay. And he was wherever it was Thomas thought he had something better to do. And Jesus was also very likely there with Thomas when he was so sad and lonesome.

But Thomas couldn't recognize it. He didn't know. He couldn't spot Jesus in those places. Even if Jesus was coming to find him and help him, still Thomas figured he was lacking, was missing out, didn't get what he needed...until that second Sunday gathering.

So it's certainly not that Jesus is locked in this place, that here behind our closed doors is the only place Jesus *could* show up to meet us. He's surely on the loose and working in the world and present absolutely everywhere you go. But you

may not recognize him. You may not be able to receive from him. You may in some way first need to be here amid the gathered community to be found by him.

The other really remarkable thing is that amid those gathered believers on that 2nd Sunday of Easter, Jesus seemed to come specifically to find Thomas in his need. He has barely said a howdy to the rest of the clan, but zeroes in directly on Thomas and shows up especially because Thomas needs him.

That must be true in this place, too, though it can feel like a counterintuitive truth. We often expect that we're closer to God when everything is going well, that on our best days is when we're most blessed, that cleanliness is close to godliness, and that we're ready to praise when we ourselves are so happy and excited and enthusiastic, that faith is riding high at the top of the wave. But this truth is that Jesus comes into the mess and the sorrow and isolating grief and low points when everything is going wrong, precisely to find you in your moment of need.

This shouldn't be a surprise. After all, in other places Jesus leaves the 99 sheep to go in search of the lost one, and he says that he is the doctor who has come not for those who are feeling healthy and doing just fine but for the sick. He finds the outcasts and welcomes them in. And restores sinners to holy community. And takes the children in his arms. And on and on. He is a scarred and heartfelt Lord, on the lookout for our scared and hurt-filled lives, our times of need, our deepest longings and worst worries.

So if you arrive amid this community today and think you've got it all figured out and are happy and not needing much, well, if that happens to be your position, I'm really glad you're still in the right place, but I'll say with only a little overstatement that Jesus might not need to bother much with you today.

But if you arrive here and all is not well, if you're longing and hurting, if you have felt left out, if you're overwhelmed by what scares you or saddens you or what has failed, if it seems that everyone is against you or that everyone else got

to have what you've missed out on, and exactly if none of this seems like you can quite believe it...then counterintuitively and with immense difficulty, it is exactly for you that Jesus shows up.

It may be the hardest for you to see, to believe, to know—but Jesus comes today and right now into this room, comes directly to you, and says, “I am here for you. I am here with life everlasting that cannot be stopped. I am here to wipe your tears. I am here to embrace and surround you with love. I am here to forgive you. I am here to foster the reconciliation that’s more than you could hope. I give you peace—peace such as the world cannot give—for your fears and anxieties. I breathe my Spirit into you, inspiring you, filling you with purpose. I am here to respond to your needs, offering my very self, that you may go back out from here and live, that you may have life.”

It is for you that Jesus was risen. He was raised to resurrect you, too, to demonstrate your injuries can no longer ultimately harm you. And so precisely in the lowest moments, we exclaim the highest praise: Alleluia! Christ is risen!