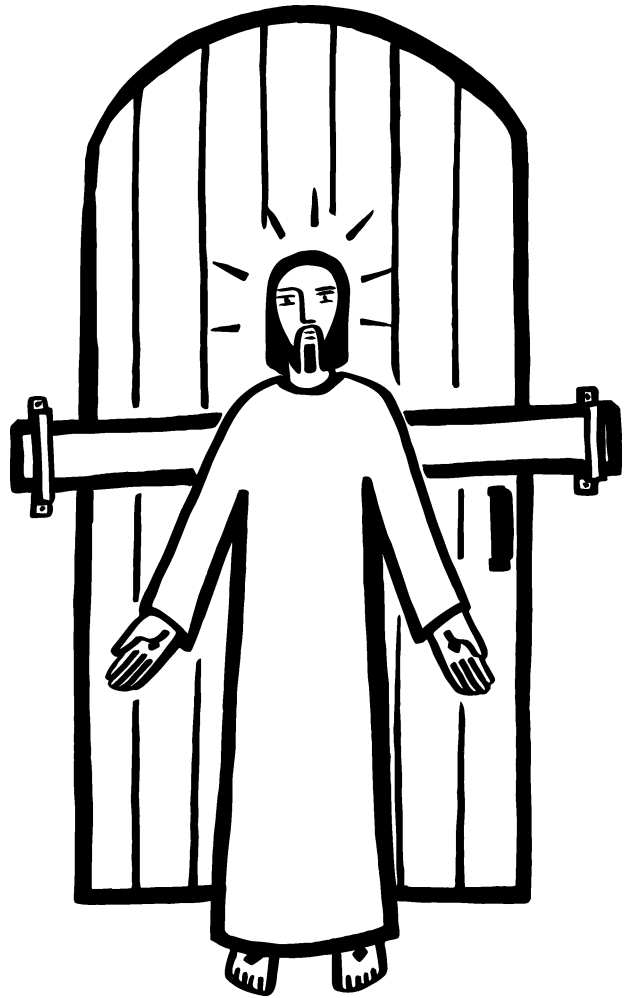


C Easter 2 4.28.19

John 20:19-31

Focus Statement: Jesus' love is inevitable.

When I write a sermon I always need one good image or idea to get me rolling, and this week that idea came from the picture on the bulletin cover this week. The bulletin cover art, by the way, comes from an online subscription service we have that has all the readings, music, worship pieces, etc. that we use in worship planning. Each week there are like five or six images that relate to the readings for that Sunday. So when I'm working on the bulletin I flip through them and generally just pick the one I think is the prettiest, and then promptly forget what I chose and am as surprised as you are when it shows up on the cover on Sunday. But this week I chose this one specifically because when I saw it, something about the way Jesus is standing, or the look on his face, or the way the door kind of looks like a door you'd see at an elementary school, but my first thought was, "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," "Ta-da!" Something about this picture makes me feel like Jesus is giving the disciples jazz hands.



This story, and really all of the end of the Gospel of John, is one of my favorite parts of scripture. There is this lightness and humor to the resurrection appearances in John's Gospel that feels like such a contrast to the iron-fisted control Jesus held over the scenes of the Passion. The Passion in John's Gospel is powerful, but in a heavy, dark, somber way. But in the resurrection scenes, Jesus always feels playful to me, almost like he's messing with the disciples, like the way you mess with a favorite younger sibling or a cousin.

Let me describe to you how I always envision this scene playing out. "When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples were met were locked for fear of the Jews." This opening sentence tells us a few key things about the setting. "When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week." If you remember last week's Gospel, the beginning of John chapter 20, it started, "Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb." Mary came to the tomb and found the stone had been rolled away and the tomb was empty. So she ran and told Peter and another disciple, and then they ran to the tomb, saw that it was empty, "and believed; [but] they did not understand the scripture." Remember that part, they saw but did not understand; that's going to be important later. Then, "the disciples returned to their homes."

But Mary did not return to her home, she stayed by the tomb weeping. Soon Jesus approached her, but remember she didn't recognize it was Jesus, she thought it was the gardener. Until Jesus said her name, "Mary," and she replied "Rabbouni," which means

“Teacher.” Then Jesus sent her to tell the disciples, and she “went and announced to [them], ‘I have seen the Lord,’ and she told them that he had said these things to her.”

So now it’s “evening on that day, the first day of the week,” less than twelve hours after the foot race to the tomb where the disciples “saw and believed; [but] did not understand,” after Mary came and announced to them “I have seen the Lord,” and where are the disciples? The disciples, these men who we all look up to as great heroes of the faith and models for how we are to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ are... locked in a room in fear. Great work, team.

I always imagine the disciples not just in a room, but huddled together, like a football huddle, when Jesus just sort of sidles up next to them, puts an arm around Peter and John, and says, “hey guys,” “Peace be with you.” Then, “he showed them his hands and his side,” and the disciples went bananas. Which, on one hand, sure. The guy you literally just watched be crucified and die is now not only standing next to you, inside the room you thought you’d locked the door to, still bearing the marks to indicate that yes, in fact he was crucified. But, on the other hand, Mary Magdalene literally told you about this less than twelve hours ago. I know Christianity has a bad history of forgetting that women can also teach about Jesus, but were the disciples so bad at it that they forgot what she told them in legit twelve hours?

I’m clearly a little judgey and sensitive on the issue. But Jesus was not, because despite what to me seems like a clear display of faithlessness, Jesus came, stood among them, said

“Peace be with you.” Then “he breathed on them and said... ‘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.’” Which is cool because what this means is that the work of the beloved community in the time of Jesus’ resurrection is the forgiving of sins. And sins, remember, in John’s Gospel are not moral failings, they’re not doing or saying the wrong thing. Sin in John’s Gospel is separation from God; it is being unable to recognize the presence of Christ. In other words, what the disciples were doing until Jesus showed up among them and said, “hey guys,” “Peace be with you.” But Jesus didn’t judge the disciples for this failing, for being unable to believe, or remember, what Mary said, for understanding what they themselves had seen and believed. No, Jesus showed up in their presence, showed them what they needed, and then gave them the power and authority to give that same gift to others. And not just the authority, but the obligation. “If you forgive the sins of others they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of others, they are retained,” sounds to me like responsibility, like if we don’t do this work, it won’t get done. And certainly it is work that needs to be done.

But Thomas, for whatever reason, was not with them when this happened. And history’s given Thomas a bad rap for this, for not believing when the disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But can we maybe remember real quick who else didn’t believe when they were told, “I have seen the Lord”? That would be the disciples. So why Thomas gets a bad rap for not believing the disciples when the disciples did the exact same thing to Mary is beyond me, but either way, that’s beside the point. The point is, just as Jesus had done for

the disciples, he now did for Thomas. He showed up, showed the marks on his hands, and gave Thomas everything he needed to believe.

Then with Thomas, Jesus took it a step further, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” I don’t think Jesus said this to knock Thomas, I think Jesus said this for us. Because while Jesus isn’t doing the whole popping up behind closed doors and showing us his hands thing anymore, Jesus is certainly still showing up and revealing himself to us through the beloved community. That, as the end of this morning’s Gospel reading reminded us, is the purpose of this book, so that we who do not have the experience of Jesus just popping up in the flesh “may come to believe... and through believing may have life.” In John’s Gospel seeing is the first step to believing, and in this text we see Jesus expanding the definition of seeing, so that like the Pharisees with the man born blind, we don’t get too stuck on physical sight, and are open to many ways of seeing.

Jesus gives us what we need to believe and to have life. Those ways are many and as different as we are, and they may take time, but these stories of the resurrection appearances of Jesus demonstrate for us Jesus’ patience in showing up, again and again and again, with what we need. For Mary, it was her name. For the disciples and for Thomas, it was his hands and his side. With patience and with presence, Jesus shows up in our world, behind whatever locked doors we may have constructed, with hands open to give us peace. So take a deep breath, dear people of God, and relax in the knowledge that you cannot miss Christ’s presence. Even if you do not understand. It’s not about understanding, the disciples certainly didn’t. It is about a God who continues to show up. Again and again and

again. Greeting us with peace, breathing life into us, and breaking down the walls that divide us from God. Thanks be to God, who will not be stopped. Amen.