

**John 20:19–31**

*19 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.' 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' 22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'*

*24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 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.'*

*26 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.' 27 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.' 28 Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' 29 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.'*

*30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31 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.*

Living God, with joy we celebrate the presence of your risen Word. Enliven our hearts by your Holy Spirit so that we may proclaim the good news of eternal and abundant life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

It is the first Sunday of Easter and the folks that created the Revised Common Lectionary decided to take a rest after Easter. I say this because they use the same scriptures for this day in all three years. There could be lots of reasons for this; maybe they just were tired and said “this will do,” maybe they feel the gospel lesson is really important, or maybe they wanted to make sure that the gospel was one that a substitute preacher could easily preach because so many ministers take this Sunday off. I don’t know their reasoning, but for someone who usually does preach this Sunday, I was dreading the scriptural options.

I honestly wasn’t sure what I was going to do. I was not finding much inspiration in either of the first two readings, and I’ve said a lot over the years about the story of Thomas and his doubts. Then a miracle happened. I read a lot of commentaries to glean ideas for my sermons. I have been using *Feasting on the Word* for the last few years, along with a couple of websites like *Working Preacher*. One of my favorite websites is *In the Meantime* by David Lose. He is inspired in his interpretations of the gospel scripture. I’ve heard him preach and talk in person at The Festival of Homiletics. Unfortunately, Rev. Lose has a tendency to make his reflection posts for the week on Thursday at the earliest, and sometimes as late as Saturday. Well, anyone who knows how I tend to work knows that my sermon and service preparation is finished by Thursday at the absolute latest, unless a catastrophe of biblical proportions has occurred. The point being that Rev. Lose’s inspiration tends to be too late for me to use.

So, I was pleasantly surprised when I found his blog email in my inbox Monday afternoon! Not only that, but he pointed out something. Something that made me think, and made

me look at the whole story in a different light. Something that relates to what is happening in the world today.

“What is it?” you might ask. The question is: Why was Thomas not with the disciples the first time that Jesus appeared to them? All the other disciples were huddled in the upper room. They were in solidarity and were grieving. What was Thomas doing? Now it’s not that I never considered this question before, I just haven’t related it to our lives per say.

Let’s face it. We have been sheltering in place now for three weeks. Almost everyone is looking forward to this ending soon and everything getting back to normal. I have a friend from high school that is a hair stylist and she is chomping at the bit to get back to work. I know I’m going a bit stir crazy not being able to go out and be with people, whether it’s playing 500 with the seniors on Friday, or a trip to see friends and eat at a nice restaurant in the Twin Cities.

And then I stop myself. Are things really going to go back to normal, especially in the next couple of weeks? Covid-19 cases are supposed to peak in July or August in Minnesota, and that’s because we have been making a serious effort to try to “flatten the curve.” For those of you not paying attention to this whole pandemic thing flattening the curve just means we are trying to slow the transmission of the virus sufficiently for hospitals to be prepared and capable of handling the number of sick people, and thereby lessen the suffering and loss of life associated with the unabated spikes experienced by some communities. This is a real issue out here on the prairie. According to one article I read, we have a slightly better number of ICU beds per 10,000 people, compared to other places like the Twin Cities, Chicago, and New York, but that’s because we have a lot less people spread much farther apart. And I don’t know how this all works with the fact that we are considered to be in the Sioux Falls and South Dakota region, and let’s face it, South Dakota has not been putting restrictions in place like our state has. It may be good for their economy, but they are now starting to run up some serious numbers of infected and dying people.

The point being that we may not be able to gather again in person for much longer than we initially thought. Until a large percentage of the population has been infected and survived, or a vaccine becomes available, or we have tested and isolated enough to stem the spread, we may not be able to get together in person, or at least many of us may not be willing to risk getting together. We could be looking at things being different for a year to eighteen months.

As Rev. Lose puts it, “And, truth be told, even when things do resume more along the lines of what we’re accustomed to, we may have to pause to consider whether we want to embrace fully what we once called “normal.” This pandemic has exposed more deeply some of the inequities we have perhaps accepted too easily. Those in “white-collar jobs” had a far easier time sheltering-in-place and working at home than those with “blue-collar jobs.” Those making minimum wage, including grocery workers and warehouse and delivery service employees, typically have to keep at their jobs whether they have sufficient protective gear or not. And the fragility of a shrinking middle class, limited financial savings, and healthcare beyond the reach of too many has been devastating to major sections of the population. Will we, can we, do we want to go back to this normal?”

This brings me back to Thomas. What if his absence from the group, and his doubt, were actually his way of trying to deal with reality? What if he was just trying to move on and get his life back to normal?

Let’s face it we all grieve in different ways. Maybe Thomas just needed to head back to Galilee and get back to work? When my mother passed away that was kind of the situation I was in. I knew that her death was coming, and it was mostly a matter of making the arrangements and

getting everything settled. In some ways, for me at least, my mother had died a long time before her body finally gave out.

So, Thomas had left the building. Maybe he did because, unlike the other disciples who are hiding behind locked doors, Thomas had already accepted what had happened, had moved on, and is now out and about rebuilding his life from the fractured pieces that were left to him after the horrific events of Good Friday. After all, we sometimes forget this, but Thomas is actually mentioned in other parts of the gospel. We know he prefers things that are clear and concrete; he's the one who challenges Jesus' lofty words about going on ahead of them, saying bluntly, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" And we know he has courage – he is, after all, the one who urges the disciples to go to Jerusalem with Jesus even if it means they're going to their deaths. Maybe Thomas had already moved on by that first Easter evening, or at least was attempting to, attempting to put things back in order and get back to normal.

This could be another reason that Thomas is so reluctant to believe the other disciples when they say that they've seen Jesus. He saw Jesus too. He saw him hanging dead on a cross just a few days ago. The news of Jesus's resurrection probably seemed like oh-so-much wishful thinking, or some sort of trick to this hardboiled realist. This might also explain why he eventually changes his mind upon actually seeing Jesus. I think his conversion to belief is less about simply coming to faith and more about realizing that, after the resurrection, reality itself had changed and there would be no normal to go back to. As the old saying goes, "normal is just a setting on the dryer." The resurrection is more than just Jesus coming back from the dead. It is a whole new reality for humanity. Through this resurrection all of us have been saved from death's eternal sting.

As Rev. Lose points out, "So when Thomas confesses "My Lord and my God," he is opening himself to a very different reality than he could have previously imagined because creation isn't static but is still happening. Similarly, when Jesus affirms but also stretches his testimony – "Do you believe because you've seen..." – and then blesses later believers – "blessed are those who believe and have not seen" – Jesus is simultaneously challenging and inviting and blessing all of us to recognize that, in light of the resurrection, the future is always open."

We have an opportunity to rethink what normal is. Rather than hoping and praying for everything to go back to exactly as it was before, perhaps we should be thinking about how we can make changes for the better? Maybe we shouldn't be too focused on the way we have always done things, whether it's worship, or communion, or how we present the service, and instead look for more and better ways to be the church in our community? Can we find a way of nurturing our faith so we can tend both our own and the communities physical and spiritual needs? Will we turn outward and recognize the painful but essential levelling effect of the covid-19 virus to make us realize that we are all – as individuals, congregations, communities, countries, and humanity – inextricably bound to each other and dependent on one another? The future is still open. God is still at work creating, re-creating, and sustaining us to do things we could not have imagined previously.

To a point I think that because we are in a small town, we do see this basic picture. We understand that we need to support local businesses as much as possible, because if we don't it means we have less options and have to get things from farther away. We also know that it means that if a business closes it's the loss of an income or a dream for that business owner. It's the loss of a local job for any employees that would have worked there. Lost jobs mean that

those people may have to leave the community, and so we get smaller and weaker. It's like breaking the leg on a many legged stool. Sure, the stool may be able to still stand with some legs broken, but as each leg is broken it will get shakier and shakier, and eventually the stool that represents the community will collapse.

Okay: one last word from Rev. Lose. "None of this is as easy as it sounds. Thomas, I believe, died when he saw the Risen Lord. Died to his old beliefs, died to his sense of reality, died to his deepest convictions about himself and the world. Which is why I wonder whether his exclamation, "My Lord and my God" was as much an agonized and bewildered cry as it was joyful, let alone exultant confession. And our shift to the "new normal" that will likely not be normal for long may be similarly painful. But Jesus is there amid the necessary changes and faithful adaptations, calling us forward, blessing us to believe though we do not see, and promising to be with us and for us forever."

Let us take the opportunity today to rethink what we want the new normal to look like. This situation is not easy, in fact I believe it will get much harder before it gets better. Yet, with Jesus by our side we may just be able to make some positive changes in our church, our community, and even our world. May God be with us as we go through this time. Amen