



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE REV. CANON NANCY ROSS, CANON FOR CATHEDRAL RELATIONS  
THE SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER, APRIL 19, 2020  
ACTS 2:14a, 22-32; PSALM 16; 1 PETER 1:3-9; JOHN 20:19-31

## CHANGING EVERYTHING

*John 20:19-31 [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." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "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."]*

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

*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." 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." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" 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."*

*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.]*

Do you remember the story of the rich man and Lazarus the beggar? I know, that wasn't the Gospel today, but go with me here. The rich man had everything, and the poor man Lazarus languished, ignored at his gate. When they both died, Lazarus was in heaven and the rich man was down below, in torment, and he asks Father Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers to shape up,

because if someone from the **dead** goes to them, they would listen. But Abraham responds, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

I have on occasion with that Gospel said to myself, "Well, I don't know about that. If someone came from the dead... that would

probably carry a lot of weight with me.” Don’t you think?

And yet, it’s hard to wrap your head around it, if it’s your real story, and not just a parable. Witness Easter morning – and remember, today’s Gospel in the locked room is still the same day, Easter day – and Mary Magdalene has straight up told the disciples “I have seen the Lord!” and gives them a direct message from him! Yet here they are, fearfully hiding behind locked doors, as if He were still dead. Were they not convinced? Or was Abraham right, and somehow the news of Jesus’ *Resurrection from the dead* did not **change everything** for them?

Because it wasn’t only Thomas who was afraid to embrace that hope, to change into that new reality. We call it “doubt,” but I think we’re talking about FEAR. Afraid to dare to hope. I mean, we feel the somberness of Good Friday. But these people were just there! They saw their beloved teacher and friend tortured and executed, saw the people screaming for blood, saw the fist of the empire slam into their vision and shut it down. Their hearts are broken, their future is destroyed, their own lives are at risk. How much more can they take?

So I know it’s easy enough for me to say, safe here from my pulpit and more than six feet from Cristi, “If someone came back from the dead and told them now is the victory, they should have believed it and gotten busy, those doubters!” But it turns out Father Abraham knew the truth.

Having to change the way you look at *everything* is a fearsome prospect, and there’s great uncertainty, great risk involved. This Resurrection news is wondrously, *terrifyingly daunting*. So much so, that the disciples take this life-altering revelation and cower in a locked room, and Thomas is even afraid to hope, and sputters, “I’m not going to believe it unless I absolutely have to!”

When we’re that crushed, we can’t fathom risking our hearts to embrace the change that must come – even change for the good! We’re afraid to even hope it can be that good.

I think we get that. We know how paralyzing fear of hope and change can be. It’s a movie cliché, that the broken heart is afraid to love again. If you were here in person, I’d ask you to start yelling out titles of some movies – and we’d be here for an hour!

And it’s not just relationships. I know in my younger life, I agonized for two years over moving my family across the country to California, afraid to hope things could be better, that my kids could both be happy, that I was competent enough for a big new job, that I wouldn’t be too lonely, that others would be okay without me, that risking my very spirit and listening to the **tug** inside of me was the *right thing*... And could I survive being crushed if I were wrong?

Change is so risky. *Some things need to be solid and certain*. Death and taxes, right? Well, for the disciples this night, death was overturned! The less likely of the two to be altered, but here it was! The crucified Jesus

was alive again! Talk about *everything* changing! That's what Resurrection does. Preachers like to say that Resurrection isn't an occurrence, it's a verb... Wendell Berry's famous line: "Practice Resurrection."<sup>1</sup> It's continuously happening in the Christian life. And so, if it's happening for us – then it should change EVERYTHING!

Theologian Walter Brueggemann knew our reticence well when he spoke of how there are "two categories of people faced with change: those who fear the world they treasured is crumbling all around them, and those who fear the world they dream of will never come to be."<sup>2</sup>

Wow. Can we relate to *that*, in these fraught times.

And so, think of the frightening circumstances on that Easter Sunday for those disciples in the locked room, and then Thomas: they have both of those fears: losing the beloved familiar – and never achieving the ideal.

Because either way, *everything is changed!* Resurrection compels transformation! Which is another way of saying being a Christian compels transformation!

We are finding ourselves huddled in the locked room in these pandemic times, quite literally. And we're rightfully afraid. That can affect our faith – just like those disciples who had heard the morning's good news but were

still fearfully hiding behind locked doors. But remember what happens in the midst of that fear: Jesus comes right in, and not to berate them for their shakiness, but to breathe his peace onto them! To send them – the cowards and deserters and deniers – out to spread his word and his peace! It is not just the empty tomb on Easter Sunday, friends – it's the breath and the peace and the sending forth! Resurrection transformation!

Jesus breaks into our quarantines, too – in full-on Resurrection, breathing peace and life and sending us out. Even when "out" means staying in!

But not staying in huddled and immobile! Staying in, transformed by Resurrection, held in Jesus' love and peace and compelled to do his work in new ways, in a changed world. Some of those ways we know: staying home, safe distancing, checking on folks, helping with errands, contributing to the places that are helping people who need food and aid. But what is more daunting is that we don't really know what it's going to be like for us at the other end of this, what's going to be needed from the followers of Jesus.

*Or do we?*

We may never have seen times like these, but the world has. And Christians have. At the turn of the 3rd century, the Roman theologian Tertullian famously wrote of the

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<sup>1</sup> Wendell Berry, "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front," *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry*, Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, March 2009

<sup>2</sup> James C. Howell, Weekly Preaching, April 19, 2020, Ministry Matters, accessed April 16, 2020 at <https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/10276/weekly-preaching-april-19-2020>

Romans talking about the Christians, “‘Look,’ they say, ‘how they love one another.’”<sup>3</sup>

That is our work if we are transformed by the Resurrection, if we are followers of the Risen Jesus. Can they say that of us now? Because it continues to be our work while we’re homebound, and it will continue to be our work when we venture forth. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

It’s okay to be afraid, even uncertain, as we live into Resurrection in Jesus. The scared disciples in the locked room were transformed by the Resurrection to open their doors and become the evangelists of a new world in Christ. But even these disciples who saw him in person took some more encounters and encouragement – and downright Pentecost itself! – before they really embraced their transformation. But they were transformed, and so are we. Fear is not the absence of faith.

Baptist Pastor Michael Usey said, “Resurrection is not something that we see every day. As a matter of fact, it’s something

that we have never seen, only experienced... So, if a crucified world is to know resurrection, we Christians must practice it.”<sup>4</sup>

How? Well, we’re being forced to change by the world around us right now. In the midst of it, can we be transformed in **new ways** by the truths we already know as followers of the Risen Christ: that when things are bad, God is still with us, loving every one of us. That when we’re shaky, Jesus is there to steady us, not berate us. That *inside* a church is not the most important place that church happens. We are the ones sent to show a crucified world how resurrected life in Jesus transforms.

It’s not easy to do, because life can make it hard to hope, and even harder to risk living into a belief that changes everything. But Jesus is stepping through our locked doors, breathing peace and sending us forth. Are you in?

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<sup>3</sup> Oxford Reference, Tertullian, *Apologeticus* chapter 39, sect. 7, accessed April 13, 2020 at <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191826719.001.0001/q-oro-ed4-00010813>

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Usey, Practice Resurrection, College Park Church, April 15, 2013, accessed April 16, 2020 at <http://www.collegeparkchurch.com/practice-resurrection/>

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