



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER—APRIL 7, 2024:

ACTS 4:32-35; PSALM 133; 1 JOHN 1:1-2:2; JOHN 20: 19-31

THE SCIENCE OF GRIEF, BREATH, AND RESILIENCE

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.]*

“Unless I... put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

Thomas needs proof of resurrection. I might also say he needed a pair of gloves before touching the wounds.

I always get a chuckle when we hear this story each year on this Second Sunday of Easter. Thomas is earnest in his desire to see Jesus, but he needs evidence. Physical evidence. Peter Marty says that Thomas was essentially

wanting to conduct a First Century autopsy as proof that Jesus was alive.¹

For centuries there was a robust Christian market for relics, including the presumptive bones and body parts of apostles. These parts, although mostly unverifiable, are kept in reliquaries in churches serving as shrines of prayerful devotion.

At least four churches—in Iraq, Jerusalem, Rome, and Ortona, Italy—all claim to have Thomas' index finger. I know that polydactyly is a fairly common genetic mutation, but four index fingers is a bit much!

All jesting aside, Thomas' demand for proof seems reasonable, given the grief he must have felt. He had just witnessed his dear friend and mentor executed in grotesque fashion, literally unable to get air in his lungs while hanging on the cross, and his world had been turned upside down. Nothing made sense, the path forward was unclear, and his heart-stricken grief had him in a quagmire of uncertainty. A little observable proof of his friends' report seems a small request in the midst of it all.

I am reminded of Elizabeth Kubler Ross' famous stages of grief—you will surely know of them: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance. She originally developed them for use only by people with terminal illness, but they've been extracted and applied to all sorts of grief, and often in spurious ways.

Bereavement science has long since revealed that we do not move sequentially through these stages in predictable fashion, some people never land squarely in every stage, and we would do well not to assume that everyone must. It is not a linear or uniform path.²

Nevertheless, we all know the emotional experiences these stages attend to, and I belabor it here because I think it is reasonable to conclude that we are all bearing a substantial burden of grief in our time. Wars, senseless death of innocents, climate disasters, a tenuous political landscape, social decay surely all figure prominently in our collective psyche these days, and the vagaries of individual life in times of breathtaking loss or with cascades of change necessarily evoke a range of emotions, among them denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance, and many more.

¹ Some of the exegetical themes of this sermon are drawn from an essay by Peter Marty in [The Christian Century](#), accessed April 2, 2024.

² There has been much written about the lack of scientific rigor in Kubler Ross' work that led to this Stage Model, but they remain prevalent in the public psyche such that they still have practical use with caveats.

Can we hold it all lightly enough to see how those emotions can serve us well in the wake of loss, and how they can also ensnare us in unhelpful ways? As it all takes our breath away, we have to remember to breathe.

It seems to me that Thomas, in his demand for proof and defiance of his friends' report, may have been dealing with some anger in the wake of Jesus' death. Anger can become exacting as a coping mechanism. We would do well to cut Thomas some slack.

What is interesting is that when he does meet Jesus, his heart melts, and he no longer needs the autopsy as proof. Jesus offers his wounds for Thomas to touch, but nothing in the gospel suggests he actually does. He simply believes when Jesus speaks words of peace to him. He falls to his knees and throws his full weight of being and all those pointing fingers into prayerful devotion, "My Lord and my God!"

Thomas offers us a humble reminder that proof of God's existence is a fool's errand; what we need is the experience of God's presence to breathe again when life has sucker punched us into a breathless grief. And Jesus offers the way as Wounded Healer.

The Risen Christ is willing to wait till we are ready, however long it takes.

For those early disciples, forlorn, confused, bewildered as they were, Jesus breathes on them, and invites them to receive the Holy Spirit. His refrain is simply: Peace be with you. A peace which surpasses all human understanding. A peace that allows us to breathe again. It doesn't take the grief away, but perhaps it can transform it in some way.

David Kessler co-authored books with Elizabeth Kubler Ross in her later years. He has proposed a sixth stage of grief: Finding Meaning. Isn't that what we are all seeking?

One of the pitfalls of Kubler-Ross' stage model is that it is often postulated that Acceptance is the final turn to letting go of the grief. That is misguided. Acceptance doesn't say: it's okay that my loved one died; it says, my loved one died, but I am going to be okay. And perhaps Finding Meaning invites the human capacity to hold the grief alongside joy and peace and love and hope as sustenance for the journey forward into new life.

Bereavement science calls this Resilience³; as people of faith, we can claim it as a gift of God

³ A leading scientist in modern bereavement science is George Bonanno at Columbia University. I have served with him on hospice panels addressing bereavement, and I

commend his models highly even as I find some of his terminology (e.g., coping ugly) unhelpful.

for the People of God. Peace be with you.
Receive the Holy Spirit.

After forty days of Lent, we get fifty days of
Easter, a full seven weeks to consider what it
means to practice joy and peace and love and
hope amidst the grief and loss. The Paschal
Mystery breathed into our midst, to find

meaning while we practice resilience, never
denying the hard stuff that comes our way,
but ready to breathe in Christ's peace spoken
in our direction here and now, in whatever
ways we need to receive it.

The Wounded Healer sees you, knows you,
and loves you dearly.