

Doubting Thomas Sunday: Hitting Bottom

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St. Mary the Virgin

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John ¹⁹It was still the first day of the week. That evening, while the disciples were behind closed doors because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them. He said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they were filled with joy. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you." ²²Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you don't forgive them, they aren't forgiven." ²⁴Thomas, the one called Didymus, one of the Twelve, wasn't with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵The other disciples told him, "We've seen the Lord!" But he replied, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, put my finger in the wounds left by the nails, and put my hand into his side, I won't believe." ²⁶After eight days his disciples were again in a house and Thomas was with them. Even though the doors were locked, Jesus entered and stood among them. He said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here. Look at my hands. Put your hand into my side. No more disbelief. Believe!" ²⁸Thomas responded to Jesus, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus replied, "Do you believe because you see me? Happy are those who don't see and yet believe." ³⁰Then Jesus did many other miraculous signs in his disciples' presence, signs that aren't recorded in this scroll. ³¹But these things are written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Christ, God's Son, and that believing, you will have life in his name.

This is doubting Thomas Sunday. It is a Sunday in which we're reminded that just because we know that Easter is the big event, most of the world does not. Clearly the fact that you're here shows that you understand something about Easter that many of those who observed Easter last week do not.

I will to focus on how the church today, when we're meeting in relatively small numbers here or at home in families or on Zoom, or Facebook, resembles the small group in the house with the doors locked. Please keep that in mind as I work to get there.

What does it mean to say that Jesus Christ is risen? How does that make our lives different?

Most scholarship errs seriously in assuming that Jews were persecuting Christians. I mention this because the Gospel begins: *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. Much mischief over the centuries has been done to Jews because of this and other negative references to Jews in John.

There is no 1st century proof that Jewish Christians were expelled from the synagogue despite all that you may have read or heard about that. My study leads me to conclude that this Gospel says “Jews” so much precisely because there were so few of them in Asia Minor where John lived. This is a common ploy in the bible. Jonah talks about Assyrians centuries after they were gone because it was dangerous to talk about Babylonians or Persians. Revelation, as we saw in the study that ended on Palm Sunday, talks about Babylon centuries after it disappeared because it was dangerous to talk about Rome. I propose that John, writing in Asia Minor, talks about Jews, who were absent or powerless, precisely because he could not talk about the Romans or Hellenists who exercised real power. This is a radical statement but important because we have so frequently used the Gospel to discriminate against Jews.

The disciples had not a clue about the power of the resurrection and were still living in fear of the Ruler of This World. They were ruled by FEAR. Despite having accompanied Jesus on his ministry and hearing him predict his passion, they were ruled by fear. They fled from the public.

I am convinced that the Ruler of This World is real whether we call it evil, Satan or the Devil. I use these terms interchangeably. Evil wishes one thing for us and that is that we find ourselves alone, insecure and doubting all hope. In other words Satan wants us in the Upper Room without hope. There are many ways in which the Devil works to isolate us, for instance by class, gender, sexuality, race, merit, nationalism, etc. It is life lived in fear. We imagine that John tells this story because Jesus had not returned as had been expected. Christians were dying before the 2nd coming. Maybe the message as recorded by Paul and the gospels was wrong? How could they know? They had were in spiritual pain.

They gathered together in a small place and Jesus appeared to them. They didn't know that it was Jesus until he showed them his wounds. Then he speaks to them and gives them the authority to begin the church. At this moment they began to recover from their bottom.

The disciples are in spiritual pain. This malady involves the loss of a sense of self and who one is. The disciples are depicted as meeting in the room out of habit. They had grown comfortable in each other's company. They were nostalgic for the good old days. They did not see anything in the future which would equal what they had experienced in the past. The disease of nostalgia is a disease of losing a sense of hope in the future. Despair reigns. They are in spiritual pain.

We live in a society which denies the reality of spiritual pain. I believe that it is important for us to embrace spiritual pain as a reality and see it as an opportunity for growth. Walter Brueggemann, my favorite biblical theologian, points out that the lament psalms follow the pattern of stability, chaos, a cry for a return to former stability, and the granting of a new reality. The cry for a return to former stability, which may have been the goal of the Upper Room, is always denied. We cannot go back to what we were

in February 2020, ten years ago, or many many years ago. We are on a one-way trip to what can be an exciting future.

We are in spiritual pain. We have no idea what the church will look like when this pandemic is over. Many of those who are protesting the quarantine are doing so because they do not want to admit the spiritual pain we're in. I was on a call with other clergy in Westport and Weston on Tuesday and one has a parishioner who believes that God sent COVID 19 to test the churches and weed out the weak ones. Therefore churches should reopen, ban masks, sing loudly and behave as if nothing has happened. In that way God will winnow out the weak members. I'm glad he's not my problem. Many are looking forward to the time when life will get back to normal. Brueggemann assures us that the future may be better than the past, or it may be worse, but it will not be the same. Easter changed the world for the disciples. This quarantine/isolation is changing us and our society. We are not powerless. We can isolate. We can renew intimacy with those closest to us. We can study, read, be present in ways we could not before. We are not powerless. There is much we can do to make things worse and a simple thing we can do to make a future possible. A new future not a restoration of life as it was in February 2020. I have no idea what it will be, but it will be different because this shared experience has made us different. If you're hearing this you're probably one of the fortunate who can afford to isolate. Jesus would have been with those who cannot. It would not have been enough for Jesus to talk about the poor and powerless upon which our comfort in isolation depends, as heroes. He would've stood with them and showed real compassion to give them higher wages, PPE; in other words, he treated the powerless with compassion in ways beyond words. Can we reach out to powerlessness wherever we find it? Can we understand that a core principle of Christianity is standing with the powerless and helping them find meaning? I believe in Christianity that our God can redeem anything. That was a major point of the Revelation study. God can redeem the despair and hopelessness that many are facing and will face when society reopens. Will we accept the gift and respond by caring for the vulnerable? Can the pandemic transfer the capital C church in a community that cares above all for the vulnerable? Have we learned that lesson about Christianity?

How then did Jesus appear to the disciples and especially to Doubting Thomas? We don't know. But what we do know is that they did not recognize Jesus until he spoke to them. The Evangelists show this to be true in every appearance story. Jesus could not be discerned, even by those who knew him when he lived, until he disclosed himself. The Gospels are telling us that we cannot recognize the presence of Jesus in our midst until it is pointed out to us. It is not our initiative, devotion or intelligence which discovers Jesus, it is Jesus's self-revelation. Where then do we find this self-revelation today? We find it in a community which is not afraid to point out how Jesus continues to operate in its midst, the church with the vulnerable. We find it by observing how others find hope in their lives, and believing that there is the possibility of hope in ours.