

Jesus walks through Walls
(John 20:19-31)
Enclosed Spaces

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One of the things that has drawn my attention in a new way, since the experience of covid isolation and social distancing, is how much of the resurrection story revolves around closed spaces. The resurrection story itself begins with the instruction to leave the empty tomb, which is the ultimate definition of an enclosed space. And this morning's story about the response of Thomas and the other's to Jesus' death, also takes place in an enclosed space, presumably the place elsewhere described as the "Upper Room."

Jesus's disciples, while not yet aware that he has been raised, have responded to his death by locking themselves in the house and shutting the world out. And their response is understandable. Jesus's crucifixion and death must have been a traumatizing event that would have turned their world completely upside down.

Imagine what it must have been like to be suddenly rendered leaderless and seeing the movement you had given your life to, collapse in such a violent way. And imagine the fear would feel that perhaps you too might be identified and subjected to a similar fate. It's easy to see why Jesus's disciples would have felt the need to shut everything out in

order to create some kind of safe space, where they could eke out a few moments of happiness with the few people left they felt they could trust.

Jesus enters and is identified by his wounds

And it is into this place that Jesus comes. And he comes in a mysterious way. Since the doors are locked, you might at first imagine him climbing in the window. But then, if there was a fear that outsiders would get in, you would assume that those would have been closed as well. The story never tells us how Jesus enters. Might he have passed through the walls? The story later insists that he is as real and solid as you or I, and not a mere spectre.

And when Jesus enters, he is not recognized, but has to identify himself by showing them the wounds on his hands and sides; the wounds left by his crucifixion. This in itself seems odd, given that his disciples had spent the past several years with him and would have known his face better than anyone's. These mysterious details are important clues to the nature and meaning of Jesus's resurrection.

Jesus repeats this mysterious entry twice. And the second time it happens, Thomas, who is seeing him again for the first time, and is not

yet convinced that it is really him, is invited by Jesus to explore, literally put his fingers into, the wounds. And it is only then that Thomas recognizes who he is and identifies him with the words, “My Lord and my God.”

Resurrection 2022

I think that this story is saying something very important to us about the way we may recognize the presence of the resurrected Christ in our own lives and find our own peace, following Resurrection Day 2022.

There is a lot going on in the world today that we would like to lock out of our lives, to which we would like to close the windows of our eyes. Most searingly, there is the ongoing crucifixion of the Ukrainian people. Streets and homes that two months ago were full of healthy, happy men, women and children, going about their lives in peace, have been turned into long rows of charred and burned out rubble. They lie now like ugly scars across the landscape, testifying to the unspeakable cruelty, suffering and death inflicted on those people. And it is for us to identify this as crucifixion and to recognize the faces of the Ukrainian people as the face of Jesus as he is present with us today.

And perhaps less obvious, but nevertheless still noticeable to us is the suffering closer at hand. Even in our own midst, there are the crucifiers and the crucified. And there are many scars and wounds, both visible and invisible among our neighbors that Jesus invites us to attend to.

In short, there are wounds all over the body of this earth. And like Jesus's followers in the Upper Room, we too find ourselves tempted to lock the doors on it all; and to find some place where we don't have to be touched by the pain and suffering.

Portable Walls (The "Hard Heart")

But as it is, we live in a world mired in sin and the pain and suffering that is its consequence. And one thing that is clear is that we cannot avoid these painful realities by spending the rest of our lives cloistered away behind locked doors surrounded only by our own.

And so, it seems to me that, in an attempt to preserve the security we feel behind locked doors, we are prone to creating portable walls we can carry around with us. I am referring here to the invisible walls that harden around our hearts, that allow us to ignore and deflect the cries of the suffering that surrounds us as we walk through the world.

Those invisible walls, are like a shell that encases the heart and seems to be able to grow and harden almost by itself. All we have to do is pretend that the suffering and pain around us doesn't exist, and the walls will thicken and our capacity to hear the cries of others decreases.

What this resurrection story reveals to us is that there is no escape from the suffering in life, because even if we lock up the house, Jesus will find his way in and present it to us. In fact, the story suggest that it is only by the wounds that he bears, that we are able to identify that it is indeed him and come to the revelation that he is God.

The point then, is that the resurrection in which we may participate with Jesus, does not involve the absence of any awareness of suffering, On the contrary, it involves careful attention to the wounds others bear and to the suffering those wounds represent.

Happiness vs Joy

The difference between shutting out suffering, on the one hand and accepting Jesus's invitation to be attentive to it on the other, can be better understood, if we consider the fruits of each course of action i.e. happiness and joy.

There are many wonderful things about happiness, but it is most often understood as a transitory experience which comes to us when, we momentarily forget the world and are absorbed in something that gives us pleasure. When suffering inevitably disrupts our enjoyment, our happiness is swept away, like a tree with shallow roots that is swept away by a storm.

Joy is thought of as a much deeper and more mysterious sentiment, in that it does not involve forgetfulness, but arises within us as in response to an awareness of life in all its fullness, which includes giving special attentiveness to the suffering in its midst. And because joy cannot be blindsided by suffering, it is not transitory in the way happiness is, nor is it dismissive of the needs of others in the way happiness can be. Joy is more like a tree with deep roots that cannot be swept away by a storm.

And the marks of crucifixion on Jesus's resurrected body tell us that it is this deeper joy, rather than any forgetful or superficial happiness that corresponds with the Spirit of the Resurrection.

I think that Jesus's invitation to us to be present and attentive to the wounds on his body is especially important this year, because the situation in places like the Ukraine and many situations much closer to

us are so full of pain and suffering that we are particularly tempted to shut it all out, to look away and celebrate Easter as a time to forget what is happening. A time to simply be happy. I can't argue with the need for this.

But it is the resurrected Jesus himself that breaks through these walls and bids us to be present with and not forget the suffering that is happening around us. We must trust that, even though remaining aware in this way is painful to bear, that it is in continuing to care and be involved that the resurrected Christ will be revealed to us and the lasting peace that we seek will be breathed finally into our beings.