

Circle of Mercy Sermon
John 20:19-31
5/7/17

The Practice of Resurrection
by Missy Harris

I've been trying to make sense of the resurrection for a long time. My earliest memory of struggling with the concept of resurrection happened when I was about eight years old. I had been immersed in this grand Gospel story from the time I was old enough to sit in one of those tiny little wooden chairs in the preschool Sunday School classroom. The stories fascinated me, captured my imagination and my mind. They still do.

When I was about eight years old, my great grandmother died. I've shared this story before here, so I'll keep it short. Somehow I got it in my head that her death was temporary, that she would be back soon. I don't really remember telling anybody about this at the time. I'm sure this idea got into my head, partly because of the fact that we started each Easter morning at a sunrise service in a cemetery. In my eight-year-old imagination, the stories of Jesus' return after his death were so interwoven into my mind and spirit, that the logical conclusion for me was that my great grandmother would be coming back. It was crystal clear in my mind. This would be the scene:

We would be sitting in church on Easter morning, singing songs of the resurrection of Jesus – *Because He Lives, Up From the Grave and Christ the Lord is Risen Today*, when suddenly, the doors at the front of the church would slowly open, and in would walk the people we loved so dearly who had died. I remember lying down to go to sleep at night, praying for this/about this, anticipating what I would do or say, wondering what others would do, if they would be surprised or if anyone else even knew. So, you probably already know – this didn't happen. I was disappointed, but I didn't give up hope. I remember thinking, "Okay, maybe it will be next year. Maybe I will just need to wait a little longer."

I don't know how long I kept this story spinning in my imagination. I don't remember when I finally laid it down, recognizing that it just wasn't going to happen. But somewhere along the way, I did lay it down. I laid the possibility of this particular story down, but thank God I still find myself looking for those signs of resurrection along the way. And, when I pay close attention, I see them, feel them and know them deep in my bones.

Every year on Easter we read Wendell Berry's *Manifesto: The Mad Farmer's Liberation Front*. The poem ends with the words "practice resurrection." Spending time with the stories of Jesus' appearances to the disciples after his death remind us that resurrection does, in fact, take practice. Our minds want to classify and

quantify and categorize. The resurrection did not compute once and for all for the disciples. Jesus had to appear to them multiple times. Why should we expect it to be any different for us? Just like the disciples, we have to be reminded over and over again of the presence of Jesus with us, which often comes to us in ways we least expect. The signs are all around us.

Prior to our story from the Gospel of John tonight, we hear about how Jesus had first appeared to Mary Magdalene, and then sent her on her way to let others know. She announced to the disciples what she had seen and heard. But it seems they didn't believe her. They didn't go out looking for Jesus. Instead, we find them in a house with the doors locked, hiding and filled with fear. (It is important to note here that John tells us that the disciples hid "for fear of the Jews." The Gospel of John frequently refers to "the Jews," at times in a disparaging way. In this text, the disciples' fear appears to be related to their fear of the people who have put Jesus to death, those who carried out the orders of the Empire.)

Maybe the disciples had already given up on the Good News story that they had lived and breathed with Jesus for the past three years. Maybe they were ashamed of the ways that they had failed: falling asleep, denying him, not staying with him until the very end. Maybe their hearts were so broken, their spirits so crushed that the story of fear, doubt and disappointment felt truer and more real than what

Jesus had promised. Maybe they all had laid down the hope of the Good News story a little too quickly.

Now Thomas is the one who always gets the bad reputation in this story. He is singled out as the doubter, the one who lacked faith to believe what he had heard. But Thomas is more than a “doubter.” Earlier in John when Jesus was on his way to Bethany to respond to Mary and Martha’s pleas for him to come to their brother, Lazarus’s aide when he had become sick and died, Thomas urged the other disciples, “Let’s go, so that we may also die with him.” Let’s join in this life-giving story, even if it means our deaths. He was also honest, telling Jesus in John 14 that they had no idea where Jesus was going, so how could they know the way?

But what we remember most about Thomas is this later story in John. Why is it that we love to pigeonhole each other? What is it that we love to find ways to define and label each other in a once and for all kind of way? What makes this feel so go to us? We’ve certainly done that to Thomas, and I would venture to guess we’ve all done this at least once in our lifetimes.

The truth is that when we read this story alongside the previous verses, the other disciples were actually not that different from Thomas. They were plagued with a touch of doubt themselves. They too had not believed Mary Magdalene. What was

their response when they heard that she had seen and talked to Jesus? They went into a house and hid themselves behind locked doors.

And I can understand this. Can you imagine what they were thinking and feeling? They were mourning, hearts heavy and weighed down by grief and sadness. Jesus, their beloved friend and teacher, had been killed. Even though he had been trying to prepare them for this very moment, it seems like it hit them like a ton of bricks – like it was out of nowhere. They weren't ready for it. They were devastated. They were afraid. If Jesus really was back like Mary said, what kind of danger was ahead for all of them? I imagine a good part of their conversations centered around what had gone wrong, what they could have done differently, what to do now.

Fear and disbelief gripped the disciples as they locked themselves in a room and hid. They didn't go out to find Jesus, but he still found his way to them. He sought them out, passed through their locked doors and stood among them, and said "Peace be with you." And after he said this to them, he showed them his hands and his side, and it was at that moment that they rejoiced and recognized him (notice this is exactly what he offers to Thomas later.) And again, he said "Peace be with you," and then breathed the Holy Spirit into them, just as God had breathed the breath of life into the nostrils of the first human being. Jesus got close enough to them to breathe on them, to offer them the Spirit of new life.

All of the disciples experienced this . . . except for Thomas. He wasn't there with them when Jesus showed up. But he got word from them about what had happened, and he said that there is no way he will believe unless he sees the mark of the nails in Jesus' hands. And not only does he want to see the marks, but he also wants to put his finger in them and his hand in the wound on Jesus' side. If he can't do this, he won't believe.

It was a full eight days before Jesus came back to visit the disciples. Can you imagine for just a minute what those eight days of waiting must have been like for Thomas, in particular? Thomas had stated clearly what he needed and wanted – to see Jesus, to see and touch Jesus' wounds. Day one, day two – no Jesus. I imagine he was filled with anxiety, worry, anticipation and frustration. Day three, day four, day five – no Jesus. He had to be wondering, “Am I the only one among Jesus' closest friends who won't see him again? Why did I have to be the one who missed out on this? Have I lost the one opportunity that I actually had to see him?” Day six, day seven – still no sign of Jesus.

But on that eighth day, they were all in the room together, with the doors closed, and again Jesus stood among them. He said a third time, “Peace be with you.” Jesus invited Thomas to put his finger in his hands and his hand in his side. We don't know if Thomas actually did this. But what we do know is that Jesus made the

same offer to Thomas that he had made to the others – come and see – look – believe – it is me.

I think we are a lot like the disciples. There are times when we don't believe in resurrection. We hide in fear. We don't live like we believe that new-life and rebirth is possible. Even when others tell us about it, when others expound on the ways that they have seen and experienced it themselves, we still have a hard time believing. We want and need to see it and experience it for ourselves. We want and need to see and touch and feel in order to believe. We are hungry for physical and concrete evidence that we can see and feel and touch and taste.

How often do we find ourselves hiding behind doors of fear and unbelief, locking ourselves away from the possibility of encountering new life and re-birth? How often do our own fears and doubts win the day? How often do we believe the stories and assumptions that we endlessly spin out of our fears and doubts more than we believe in the possibility of new life and rebirth? How often do we make up our minds before we even have a chance to see there may be more to the story than we can even imagine is possible in this moment?

Jesus didn't just appear to the disciples just once and say, "Check. That's done.

Everybody gets it now. I'm going to go put my feet up for a while." No, the Gospels

give us multiple accounts of him showing up in the midst of his closest friends. The funny thing is that in every one of his post-resurrection appearances, there was a moment or two when they didn't recognize him. Time after time, they had no idea it was Jesus.

The recognition came when they heard his voice, calling them by name. The recognition came when he showed them the scars on his hands and on his side. The recognition came when he gave them some advice about their fishing practices and cooked breakfast on the beach for them. They recognized Jesus because he came to them in ways that they could see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and feel. They recognized Jesus speaking. They saw and heard and felt him. They tasted the bread he broke with them. Even so, there was always that moment or two or three, every single time he showed up when they had absolutely no idea who he was. Resurrection took practice for the disciples who had known Jesus personally. They had to be reminded again and again and again. Jesus repeatedly sought them out and passed through their doubts and fears and uncertainties.

The beauty is that Jesus – just like he sought out the disciples – continues to pursue us – in spite of and right smack in the middle of our fears and doubts and uncertainties. Just like Thomas, our knowledge of the resurrection does not guarantee that our belief in some way will magically get easier. All that we can do

is begin where we are and try to keep paying attention, to keep learning and growing. If we keep our eyes and ears and hearts and minds open, we just might see and hear and feel and touch the signs and wonders of new life around us.

And I wonder if a good part of our work is to figure out how to unlock the doors of our fears and doubts and uncertainties – to get out of the way and to more freely welcome into our midst the Spirit of the Living God who waits for us around every corner, breathing her peace into us at every turn.

Abby gave me an image for this work just yesterday. She brought home the three mice (Cocoa, Snowflake and Rue) from her second grade classroom for the weekend. You should know that I have less than loving feelings toward mice – even if they are the “cute” pet ones from the second grade classroom.

Abby accidentally let one of the mice go in her room yesterday, and my behavior and the words that followed as I tried to help her catch that wiggly little creature were – let’s say, a little less than calm and rational. I might have even used some words that I shouldn’t say in front of children or from this pulpit. It was pure, unfiltered, irrational fear that overcame me. After what felt like 20 minutes (but was probably more like four or five) the said mouse was captured and returned to

the cage. A few minutes later, Abby came into the living room and sat down beside me and said, “Momma, I had no idea you were afraid of mice that bad.”

I was away from the house for a few hours, and when I came back I told her that I was sorry that I had reacted the way I did – that it surprised me too – that I’ve actually never really had up close and personal interaction with a “friendly” mouse.

She asked me to come in her room and told me she would like for me to defeat my greatest fear. Even though I knew where this was likely going, I played along. She proceeded to draw on a piece of paper a series of circles. She told me the middle circle represented the things that I do that don’t scare me, things I do all the time, without even thinking about them.

She then asked me to name something I’m afraid of. I told her that I don’t like heights very much. So she said, “Can you imagine getting a Frisbee off the roof for me if I threw it up there and couldn’t get it down myself?” I said, “Yes. I could probably do that.” She responded by pointing to the middle circle, “See, you’ve made your circle bigger.” Then she drew another circle around the other two and said, “Now what if this circle is holding one of the mice. Can you imagine your circle becoming that big?” I told her that I thought I could, but maybe not right at that moment – that I needed to sleep on it.

When she got up this morning, the first thing she asked me was, “Are you ready to defeat your fear?” How does one say no to that? I told her I’d try. She got Cocoa out of the cage and talked me through the whole thing. And there I was, holding that squirmy mouse with its long pink tail and beady little eyes. I could only hold it for about 30 seconds, but I did it. I knew she needed to see me not freak out like I had yesterday, and at some level, I knew I needed it too. I wanted her to see that it is possible. I wanted her to know that she can do it. I wanted her to see and know that she has the capacity to help other people do it too.

There was something really powerful about this image of ever widening circles that she drew. It is the ever-widening circles that help us slowly open ourselves up to facing our deepest fears. We need each other to do this. We need to be in relationship with each other to do this. We need encouragement to do this. We need to lay some of our old stories down, ones that we have outgrown to do this. We need to look for, pick up and live into those new narratives that find their way through doors locked tightly and wait for us – to receive the peace that they have to offer our weary and fearful souls. We need to get close enough to each other to breathe in these Spirit filled moments together. We need to bear witness to – see, feel, hear, taste and touch these moments together. We need to practice.

John closes this passage with Jesus saying to the disciples, “Blessed are those who

have not seen and yet have come to believe,” and by naming that Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of the disciples that are not written down. And he invites us into the ongoing, God is still speaking story – we are the ones who didn’t see these things and yet, we believe.

Friends, when our fears and doubts and uncertainties get the best of us, remember that the possibilities of ever widening circles of new life and rebirth are endless. The story continues. The signs are all around us. Look for them. Reach out. Get close enough to each other to breathe them in together. Keep on believing. Keep on practicing.