

“Waiting For Peace”

John 20:19-31

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I have noticed, just in the last week or so, the return of traffic. After more than a year of driving into McLean and making it through the light on Old Dominion and Balls Hill the very first time, just last Thursday I had to sit and watch it turn green then red then green then red and green again before I got through it. And that would be at the absolute bottom of the list of things I have missed in the pandemic.

As the vaccination roll out continues, as of April 1st one third of Virginia’s total population had at least one shot, you can see signs of increased activity: Fairfax County Schools have reopened two days a week and have the possibility of going to four, some offices are reopening, soccer and baseball fields are full of kids, in three more Sundays there will be worshippers in here again.

Yet I am reluctant to say that things feel more normal, or are returning to what they were before the pandemic, because that would overlook the continued mask wearing, the Covid- health check forms, the required steps of registration for activities, even church ones, and other outward markers of the pandemic that remain part of life. It is not just external, there are the internal markers that linger, the effects of a year of pandemic brain fog and maintaining an alert crisis mode for so long, mental toll of grief in loneliness and loss, and in numbers like 560,000 dead in the US, nearly 3 million worldwide (John Hopkins online data), and according to Forbes (Forbes.com) 57 million people requesting unemployment benefits, just in the first six months of the pandemic, and in studies that show a marked increase in alcohol consumption this past year, a sharp rise in adolescent depression and anxiety, among many other internal effects of long-term stress.

Our Lenten Speaker, Dr. Denise Demkowski Hopkins, described trauma as something that shatters your understanding of the world, that overwhelms your systems of care, and challenges your sense of control, connection and meaning.

Living in a pandemic is a form of trauma where how you see yourself and the world, is overturned by, as one trauma expert puts it, sustained and severe feelings of helplessness. <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20210203-after-the-covid-19-pandemic-how-will-we-heal>

Many people across my life – parents on baseball sidelines, friends, family members, neighbors, church members, have expressed something I feel too, as external things are opening up, so is that place inside where we have held all of the pain and panic, the confusion and chaos, the disruption and dissonance of the past year. On the cusp of what should feel better, many are feeling worse, and didn't see it coming. Or are ambivalent of the bad returning with all the good. Or that the priorities in ourselves and our country we hoped were shifting are starting to slide backwards. Or are fearful that we don't remember how to do simple things anymore, like make small talk or get to meetings outside the house on time, or maybe the fear is that expanding our world while our hurt is leaching out will mean that people will see right in us, or through us, and know how wounded we are, and that vulnerability is the scariest thing of all.

And because we are afraid, and hurt, and confused, Jesus shows up right on cue. Because John Chapter 20 shows us that whatever we try to lock away or however we try to lock ourselves away, it just won't keep Jesus out. Like the beeline he makes for Thomas, Jesus seeks that very place in us, as a one, and us, as a together, and heads right in. And when he gets in there, he doesn't hover above us removed like a flying angel; nope he stands among us, like he had been there the whole time, because of course he has been.

Then he doesn't reprimand us for our fear. There is no chastising for how, like the disciples locked in that room, we know everyone Jesus did and said, and we still aren't doing any better than how we are at that very moment. Instead, he leads with this, offering of peace, and the breath of the Spirit, and encouragement that we offer the kind of forgiveness that Jesus models, in that very moment, when he is not rebuking us for our failures.

And most importantly, he doesn't prove to the disciples or to us that he is really Jesus raised from the dead by blinding us with the rays of light emanating from his halo and white robe and smoothed out skin but by showing us his actual wounds, hands and side.

In A New York Times opinion article last Saturday, Why is Jesus Still Wounded after his Resurrection, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/03/opinion/christ-resurrection-easter.html> Peter Wehner asks this question to a series of theologians and reports their answers. It is worth a read if you can access it. Fleming Rutledge's answer got me thinking something I never had before when she said "the wounds of our Redeemer will always be there, for all eternity" and I considered for the first time that in the beginning when there was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God, the Word wasn't wounded.

Not until the incarnation, the crucifixion and resurrection, and now forevermore those wounds are there and one day we will see them.

And that matters, because we need to know that the wounds don't stop Jesus from resurrection and new life, so they point to the very possibility that our own wounds won't stop us from those very same things. Because a wound can heal, and it can become a scar, and sometimes a scar so small that it is not particularly visible, but the thing that caused the wound can't be undone. It happened. Wouldn't have guessed this 13 months ago, but turns out, global pandemics happens. Job losses happen. Ruptured relationships happen. Medical events and accidents happen. Death of possibility, of meaning, of identity, happens.

And when they happen, we get wounded. And so Jesus comes to us with arms out to show us the nail holes, with a side wound still so open that Thomas could have put his hand inside it, and in those wounds helps us to see what Walter Bruegemann says about resurrection. "Resurrection is a form of life in which death is integral to its newness." (My reference is to the September 23, 2008 Issue of the *Christian Century* but I didn't write the name of the exact article. Will do more digging.)

Death happens, but in Jesus the expected outcome of death is overcome. Wounds happen, but in Jesus the expected outcome of our wounds is overcome. Even the ones that take forever to scar, or the ones that start to scar but we pick at it until it opens up, in those very places is the promise of resurrection where death and its wounds are integral to our new life. Because, simply, his body was really broken and his blood really shed, and that should have been the end of the story, of

his story, but it wasn't. So what breaks you right now isn't the end of your story either.

John 20 is no Kelly Clarkson (or Conan the Barbarian to go further back) message of "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger." We learn pretty much the opposite from Jesus – there are things in this life that can kill you – they can be the things that slowly deaden your spirit, or things that instantly break your heart, and those things leave their wounds. But new life is just a stone's roll away, and Jesus pops in when your wounds are burning to breathe some Spirit on them, to proclaim peace into the storm of your pain, to show you his wounds to give you hope that healing, wholeness, and redemption can include yours too, that you don't need to work so hard to hide them from him, from yourself, from your people, from your church.

The writer Debie Thomas says that "Maybe Christianity's best appeal is its courage in the face of what scars, rips, and ravages. (Debie Thomas article in the *Christian Century* 6/11/2020) Our wounds don't tell the whole story. But the stories they do tell are holy. If Jesus didn't fear the bloody and the broken, perhaps we don't need to fear them so much, either." It's been a hard year. And I feel wounded by it. And maybe you do too. And because we are afraid, and hurt, and confused, we better be on the lookout for Jesus to show up because that is his cue, and we will find him standing among us, and showing us his wounds, as those same wounded hands stretch out to point us towards the crack of light coming in through the tomb door, the locked door, so we gather up ourselves, wounds and all, and follow him toward what is waiting on the other side.