

Easter 2 C 2022

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

April 24, 2022

John 20:19-31

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

Today's gospel is read in our churches every year on this Sunday. It's been that way forever. Like, for a thousand years. Literally. The story involves Jesus appearing on the evening of Easter day. But Thomas wasn't there. Then one week later Jesus appears again. And Thomas *was* there. So the second part of the story takes place today, as it were, the Second Sunday of Easter. So that's probably why we always read it.

And it's a story that stands up to repeated reading. The thirteen verses of this story are, in my opinion, the most densely packed verses of the entire Bible. The Gospel itself— the Gospel according to John, the fourth gospel— is densely packed. It's some kind of labyrinth that you can spend your whole life exploring. But these verses in particular are a distillation of so many deep and important things. A very fine distillation. It can be tasted again and again without ever becoming a bore.

A wise preacher will only attempt to follow one thread of this rich tapestry. Since I aspire to be a wise preacher, I will attempt to follow only one thread in this story. Actually one simple word in this story. But before I can share that one simple word, I want you to understand that this story follows immediately after the Easter morning story in which Mary Magdalene met Jesus in the garden. And that is also a densely packed story. Jesus speaks to Mary, and she turns around, and she doesn't recognize him. She's in a garden. So she assumes that he is a gardener. I picture him wearing overalls and a straw hat and holding a pair of clippers. Christianity needs a stained glass image of Christ the Gardener.

Anyway, she assumes that he is a gardener until what? What happens? He speaks her name. In his act of knowing her, she recognizes him. ("I will know fully, even as I have been fully known," said the Apostle Paul.) Earlier in this gospel, Jesus spoke of the Good Shepherd. *He calls his own sheep by name... the sheep follow him because they know his voice.* So Jesus is recognized by Mary because he is her Good Shepherd. And he speaks her name. But until that happens, she doesn't recognize him.

If Jesus had an iPhone— you know, if the Magi had given him gold, frankincense, myrrh, and an iPhone— then after his resurrection, the face scan technology would not recognize him. After the resurrection, he would not be able to unlock his phone with facial recognition. The phone might not recognize his fingerprint either. But if he spoke, if he said "Hey, Siri," then the

phone might unlock for him. That's what happens with Mary Magdalene. I can't believe I just compared Mary Magdalene to an iPhone. Obviously my journey to becoming a wise preacher will be a long journey.

So that was Easter morning, the first eighteen verses of the chapter. And now we are on Easter evening, starting in verse nineteen. And once again we have a recognition issue. Jesus appears and says "Peace be with you." Next he shows them his hands and his side. And now we come to that one special word. *Then*. *Then* the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. So they don't recognize his face either. Like Mary Magdalene. In fact, they don't recognize his voice. Of course, he called Mary by name. In this case he says, "Peace be with you." But they don't recognize him until he shows them his hands and his side. *Then* the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

The word "then" is a simple three-letter word in Greek. *Oun*. He showed them his hands and his side. *Oun*. *Oun* does not refer to sequence, the way "then" does in English. No. The possible translations of that word are: then, therefore, accordingly, consequently, these things being so. So let me re-state the verse using a couple of these other words. *He showed them his hands and his side. Therefore the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. He showed them his hands and his side. Consequently, the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. He showed them his hands and his side. That being the case, the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.* So the wounds are necessary for their recognition of the resurrected Jesus. It isn't just show and tell. Some of you remember the movie *Jaws* and how the three men on the boat start drinking and comparing scars. Well, this isn't that. The scars are decisive. It proves that this person who has mysteriously appeared in a locked room is actually Jesus. And after they have recognized him—the text says they saw him—and after they have rejoiced, he says a second time "Peace be with you." So he offered his peace once before they recognized him. After they recognized him, he said it again. There's something about his peace. It can't just be spoken. It can't just be words. You have to know that it comes from him.

The hymn that we are about to sing begins with this assertion: *We walk by faith, and not by sight*. More good words from the Apostle Paul, which our hymn will blend into today's gospel. But starting with Mary Magdalene and then continuing with the male apostles, facial recognition does not work. If that's true for them, it must be even more true for us. That's part of what Jesus means when he says to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Jesus is referring to us. If they have trouble seeing him, then we have even more trouble seeing him.

But the wounds of Jesus are how they *ARE* able to see. Mary Magdalene was able to see the reality after her name was spoken. (Different story, different sermon.) The wounds of Jesus remind us that he suffered. Which in the Christian religion means that God suffered. The nature of Christianity and our message is not a message of suffering. But it is a message of a love that is willing to suffer. The Church describes that love in a variety of ways. Unconditional love. Self-giving love. Self-sacrificing love. Eternal love. The author of this gospel is also the author of a

letter called First John. And in that letter, the author states that God is love. That, I think, is the Christian truth. The Christian message. At its simplest, “God is love.”

Sometimes simplest is best. “God is love.” But that may be too simple. Because it is a love which is willing to suffer. It is the love of a person who is willing to lose himself in that love. To *literally* lose their own self for the sake of another. That is the essential character of God. And when you see that, you are therefore seeing the risen Jesus, and in seeing the risen Jesus, you are seeing God. I mentioned that in this densely packed story, there are many threads. Thomas says, “My Lord and my God!” That is the only place in the Bible where Jesus is called God. Jesus is called a lot of things, he has a lot of titles. Only here in this story which we read annually— only here does Jesus receive the highest acclamation of all: God. Thomas, in seeing love that gives itself for others, Thomas recognizes Jesus; and Thomas declares that this is the very nature of God. This is God. God is love. Love is God.

The Easter season in the Church is this elaborate 50-day season that encompasses the Ascension and Pentecost. But Easter contains the Passion. Easter contains Good Friday. These wounds indicate that the resurrection encompasses the crucifixion. Indeed, apart from the crucifixion, these apostles are unable to recognize Jesus. So the message of Easter is not simply a message of life overcoming death. It is a message of God’s love. It is a love triumphant, a love that overcomes. But it is also a love that we are called to embrace. And when we live our lives on the basis of that kind of love— a love that occasionally gets wounded and scarred— when we act and decide and live on that basis, then others can see God. They can see God through us, in a way that is related in substance and in truth to how Thomas saw his risen Lord and his God. Others can see God in a manner akin to how Thomas saw God. That’s very powerful. Alleluia for that. Amen to that. Alleluia, and amen.