



# Worship Service: Looking for Resurrection

## Transcript of Key Messages

### Scripture: John 20: 19-29 (NRSV)

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, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

### Sermon: Dead as a Doornail, Alive as Beauty by Bishop David Bard

Dear friends in the Minnesota Conference, I greet you in the grace of our risen Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the peace and power of the Holy Spirit. It is good to be with you on this Sunday after Easter.

The Sunday after Easter—an interesting Sunday to preach. It is referred to as "low Sunday," a liturgical contrast to the high festival of Easter. It is often a low Sunday in attendance too, rivaling the Sunday following Christmas Eve. It seems an easy Sunday to say, "You know, we were in church a lot last week." If you're here, thank you. I also want to say that I hope this sermon is providing some respite for pastors and worship leaders who have been working so hard during this pandemic time. We've all been stretched, and I am grateful for the creativity and persistence among our congregations as we are in ministry for Jesus Christ together.

Today's scripture reading finds us in the aftermath of Easter. Something has happened—something wild,

significant, difficult to fathom. The disciples of Jesus are still trying to figure it all out, this news that Jesus who was crucified has been seen alive. In John's gospel, Mary Magdalene, Peter, and "the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved" have found an empty tomb. Jesus appears to Mary, mysteriously, unrecognizable at first.

Now it is evening, and we find the disciples gathered together, but gathered behind locked doors and in fear. Suddenly, Jesus is there among them. Is he recognizable right away? The story is a little ambiguous. His identity is made clear with the marks on his hand and side. He brings a greeting of peace. The disciples are filled with joy. He breathes on them inviting them to receive the Holy Spirit as they are sent to continue the ministry of Jesus—connecting deeply with God, healing, forgiveness, justice, reconciliation, peace, and love.

Thomas, one of the disciples, has missed the meeting. As close as he may be to his friends, his fellow followers of Jesus, he is not ready to simply take their word about Jesus' appearance. A week later, the disciples are again gathered behind closed doors. Apparently, fear doesn't just go away. But this time Thomas is with them, and he encounters the risen Christ for himself. Thomas is not left out, not written off.

I would call our attention to two elements of these stories. Pay attention to the context. The disciples are gathered behind locked doors or shut doors. There is fear and doubt among them, uncertainty, and anxiety. Something has happened, but they're unsure of what to make of it or how to respond. It's a bit like the Bob Dylan song, "You know something is happening, but you don't know what it is." Even after the witness of Mary Magdalene, even after an appearance to them, a week later they still gather behind closed doors.

The second element of these stories to which I would call our attention is the nature of Jesus' appearances. Jesus shows up and his showing up is mysterious and brief. As in the Easter story itself, Jesus shows up but is not immediately recognizable. Mary mistook him for the gardener. The disciples seem uncertain until they see his wounds. His wounds say something important about resurrection. In his book "Wishful Thinking," Frederick Buechner contrasts the immortality of the soul with resurrection: "The Bible instead speaks of resurrection. It is entirely unnatural. We do not go on living beyond the grave because that's how we are made. Rather we go to our graves as dead as a doornail and we are given our lives back again by God (that is: resurrected) just as we were given them by God in the first place because that is the way God is made" (51). From dead as a doornail to alive, wondrously and mysteriously alive.

So I wonder, given the trajectory of these stories, did Thomas never doubt again after his brief encounter with Jesus? Did any of the other disciples? A week later they were still behind closed doors. When they left—and obviously they did leave that room otherwise we would not be here today as follower of Jesus—when they left, did they never go back behind locked doors? Other gospels suggest that there is not a straight line between an experience of the resurrected Jesus and courageous ministry for Jesus. In Matthew, we read of the encounter of the disciples with the resurrected Jesus: "When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted" (Matthew 28:17). In Luke, the first reaction of the disciples to the witness of women to the resurrected Jesus was incredulity. "These words seemed to them an idle tale" (Luke 24:11).

I ask these questions as a way to connect with our own experience. If any year has given us reason for doubt, anxiety, fear, and uncertainty, this would be one. Over half a million of our fellow citizens have died from COVID-19, not to mention the thousands of others worldwide. While the development of vaccines has been remarkable, the rapid spread of the coronavirus has demonstrated our fragility and has sent waves of uncertainty across our world. A few months into the pandemic, right here in Minnesota, the death of George Floyd, while in police custody, touched off a wave of protests and initiated a period of serious reflection. That some of the protests became occasions for rioting, looting, and violence did not help further racial reckoning and created more fear, despair, doubt, and uncertainty. Never in my lifetime has a presidential

election created so much turmoil, doubt, despair, and uncertainty. Never in my worst nightmares would I have imagined the storming of our Capitol building on January 6 of this year.

The doubt, fear, and uncertainty have faith dimensions to them. Hope is an essential element of our faith, and we have experienced a diminishment of hope. We wonder how a country so influenced by Christian faith can still struggle so mightily with racial justice. How is it we've not recognized the essential humanity of persons and worked to mitigate the dreadful effects of slavery, Jim Crow laws, community segregation, redlining, and sundown towns? How is it that someone breaking into the Senate chambers feels it appropriate then to shout out, "We invoke your name, Jesus Christ?"

There seems to be no direct line between an experience of resurrection and permanent transformation. Even profound experiences of the grace of God through the risen Christ don't preclude future moments of doubt, questioning, uncertainty. Like the resurrection encounters, there is a certain brevity and mystery, the intensity of which might wax and wane in our lives. As United Methodists, we're probably familiar with the Aldersgate experience of John Wesley of May 24, 1738. After a period of profound self-examination and self-doubt, Wesley went to prayer meeting and writes about it in his journal: "In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works through the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death" ("John Wesley," edited by Albert C. Outler, 66). We are aware of that, but fewer of us are aware of the letter he wrote to his brother Charles in June of 1766. In that letter, he says, "And yet, this is the mystery: I do not love God. I never did. Therefore I never believed in the Christian sense. Therefore I am only an honest heathen, a proselyte of the Temple... and yet to be so employed of God" ("John Wesley," 80). Of course Wesley's final words as he died were, "best of all is, God is with us."

All this is to say that in our lives we may find ourselves in locked rooms of fear, doubt, uncertainty, anxiety, touched by despair. And at such times we need Jesus to show up again. We need fresh encounters with the risen Christ in all their power, even if also in all their brevity and mysteriousness. There may be times in our lives when fear and uncertainty feel like a kind of death. Frederick Buechner's description of this is poignant and powerful: "Have you wept at anything during the past year? Has your heart beat faster at the sight of beauty? Have you thought seriously about the fact that someday you are going to die? More often than not, do you really listen when people are speaking to you instead of just waiting for your turn to speak? Is there anybody you know in whose place, if one of you had to suffer great pain, you would volunteer yourself? If your answer to all or most of these questions is no, the chances are that you're dead" ("Wishful Thinking," 62).

There is such a thing as death in life. There are times when our spirits can be dead as a doornail, and we need to encounter again the risen Christ. We need to experience resurrection, enough resurrection to move out of the locked room, enough resurrection to pray the next prayer, enough resurrection to keep moving forward in life and ministry.

And here is the good news: Resurrection happens. Jesus still shows up and breathes the Holy Spirit. And sometimes what it takes for us to see Jesus and to feel the power of resurrection again is to open our eyes and our hearts. Jesus shows up again and again and again, but we might mistake him for the gardener.

Following the killing of George Floyd, there continues to be a genuinely deep engagement with racial reckoning in our church and society, a deep desire to keep working at this until we make a more permanent shift in our world. His death revealed a real deadness in our world, a deadness to human pain and suffering and an indifference to the unfinished work of civil rights. The Black writer James Baldwin in his 1964 essay

"The Uses of the Blues" wrote: "What I'm much more concerned about is what white Americans have done to themselves...In evading my humanity, you have done something to your own humanity" ("The Cross of Redemption," 74-75).

A deadness in our lives and society has been revealed. It is as if Jesus is showing up in the locked room of fear and breathing the Holy Spirit so we can move forward into newness of life. The Spirit can give us the courage and vulnerability we need to do the challenging work of racial reckoning. Resurrection happens. Jesus shows up.

In this time of pandemic, we have been encouraged to stay in our spaces for the good of others; we have not let fear dominate those spaces. You have been creative and resilient in ministry. There are certainly many stories that could be told here. The Moose Lake and Cromwell United Methodist Churches, for example, joined together to offer a single, online worship service. Before the pandemic, the congregations were worshipping combined about 40 people. Their online services are now being viewed 300 to 900 times per week, and around 1,000 people viewed their service at Easter 2020. Other churches and pastors are working together to create worship and learning opportunities in difficult times. Resurrection happens. Jesus shows up.

On All Saints Day, Anoka United Methodist Church was one among a number of churches that hosted a "Luminaries for Loved Ones" event. Church and community members were invited to write the names of their loved ones who had died from COVID-19 on luminary bags. People were invited to drive through the church parking lots to see the luminaries, remember and celebrate these lives, and hear prayers and music through an FM radio station. Resurrection happens. Jesus shows up. Light and life are proclaimed in the face of death.

Christ United Methodist Church, located across the street from the Mayo Clinic, is starting a community healers ministry. They are seeking to support health care workers who have borne so much of the trauma around the pandemic. They are offering encouragement and encouraging others to engage in practices that mitigate the spread of the coronavirus.

At Christmas United Methodists across the state participated in the "Go Light Your World" campaign to share light and love with health care workers in their communities. Resurrection happens. Jesus shows up.

Before the pandemic, the trend in church affiliation and activity was on a significant decline. Those identifying with no religious affiliation continued to grow at a rapid pace. There is uncertainty about what impact the pandemic may have on that trend. What might a post-pandemic church look like? We don't have all the answers, but we have 10 churches identifying, equipping and empowering lay leadership to lead digital campuses. Silver Lake United Methodist Church celebrated its years in ministry as a congregation even as it made the challenging decision to sell its property. These financial resources will be used to support a new kind of ministry, a fresh expression of church without a facility, rooted in small groups and focused on the community. Many members of the Silver Lake congregation will be part of this new way of doing church. Resurrection happens. Jesus shows up.

I celebrate these signs and moments of resurrection. I also invite you to reflect more personally. Where has Jesus shown up in your life, even when you've felt trapped in locked rooms of fear, doubt, and uncertainty. Where has resurrection happened when you may have felt dead as a doornail emotionally and spiritually? Where do you need Jesus to show up for you in your life right now?

Poet and writer Maggie Smith tells this story that took place during a difficult time of transition in her life.

Her marriage had ended after 19 years, and the life she had known was gone. Out of her grappling with everything came a book, "Keep Moving," and it is there that she tells this story: "One morning I looked out the bathroom window and couldn't believe the sky I saw—banded magenta, aqua, purple. I shouted to the kids, "Hurry, look out back!" My son, who was downstairs, went straight out the backdoor to see the sunrise. But my daughter came running into the upstairs bathroom. "What's wrong?" she asked. "Nothing's wrong—just a beauty emergency. Look at that sky!" Because she is my child, she knows what a beauty emergency is: one of those things you have to look at now, before its gone" (32).

Resurrection happens. Jesus shows up. Often briefly and mysteriously, like a beauty emergency. Theologian Patricia Adams Farmer writes in her book "Embracing a Beautiful God," "Beauty is that which glistens on the edges of our yearnings and lures us into the depths of things" (1). Marjorie Suchocki, in introducing Farmer's book, writes: "In attending to beauty, we open ourselves to participation in God's own transformation of things to modes of beauty not yet realized" (xi). One of the gifts of this pandemic year for me has been Howard Thurman, whose writings keep coming into my life again and again. In his book "Deep is the Hunger," Thurman writes: "There must be always remaining in everyone's life some place for the singing of angels, some place for that which in itself is breathlessly beautiful and, by inherent prerogative, throws all the rest of life into a new and creative restlessness, something that gathers up in itself all the freshest of experience from drab and commonplace areas of living and glows in one bright white light of penetrating beauty and meaning—then passes... Despite all the crassness of life, despite all the hardness of life, despite all the harsh discords of life, life is saved by the singing of angels" (91-92).

Resurrection happens. Jesus shows up. Often like a beauty emergency, brief and mysterious, yet life-changing, even knowing that we will need to encounter the risen Christ again and again. Resurrection happens. Jesus shows up. Even when we find ourselves again in locked rooms of fear and doubt, uncertainty and anxiety. Jesus shows up to breathe on us the Holy Spirit, giving us new life, new eyes to see, new strength for the journey. Jesus breathes into us the Spirit so we can find new ways to share good news, create community, and heal a broken world. Resurrection happens. Jesus shows up. Even in those places in our lives where deadness has encroached, even when we may feel something in our life dead as a doornail. Jesus shows up, alive as beauty, like the singing of angels, and despite all the crassness of life, despite all the hardness of life, despite all the harsh discords of life, life is saved by the singing of angels, by resurrection, by this Jesus who keeps showing up. Amen.

**Prayer: Morning Has Broken by Rev. Cindy Gregorson**

Okay, God. Can I just say it? It has been a long, hard winter. Our souls are so hungry for spring. We need spring! We have been cooped up in our houses, trapped in our Zoom squares, weighed down with layers upon layers of clothing when we did brave the outdoors, double masking, keeping six feet of distance, walking quietly past people—no lingering for a lovely conversation, or even barely a hello or a nod of the head. And certainly no hugging or handshakes. We would turn to our TVs for a bit escape...but the world kept intruding: Riots in the Capitol, a shooting in a health clinic in our own community, deep freeze weather across the country, adding to the suffering and misery of this pandemic.

And the waiting, God, the waiting. When will it be my turn for a vaccine? When can our children return to the classroom? When can we gather safely as a family again? When will this winter of a pandemic ever end?

Tell me, God: What do you see? What do you know that we don't know?

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Yes, God, there has been gift. Even in this COVID year, yes, there has been gift. Sunshine. I am so grateful for sunshine, God. To walk outside, to see the sun brilliant against the blue sky...my soul would start singing. Thank you for that. Every day, when the sun rises, it is a promise of yet another new beginning.

And the people, God—the countless people who just showed up and cared: The doctors and the nurses and the grocery store clerks and the delivery drivers and many, many others. They didn't make the news, but they are the fabric that held us together and held us up. Thank you, God, for the heart of caring and serving you gave them and to help them keep going even when they were tired. Thank you for placing people in our lives to help us get by. They are a song in the silence.

So God, even as I yearn for a better day, help me remember and be grateful for this day.

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In our death, a resurrection. No matter how long or how hard this winter, it is not the end of the story. Spring comes because that's how you designed creation, God. So just as the earth is moving out of its winter, and we see the greening and the blooming and all the new life bursting forth, help us to trust in resurrection in our own lives. Out of our brokenness, you can bring healing. In our conflicts, you do seed peace. In our despair, you plant hope. But even more, God, even more—give us the courage and the boldness to practice resurrection. You are alive and at work in the world. Christ is risen! And you dare to invite us not only to believe it, but to actually live it, to participate in it, to be a part of the seed-planting, peace-making, hope-sharing resurrection life!

Give us, God, the eyes to see, the heart to perceive, the courage to proclaim...that this indeed is a new day and a new beginning. Morning has broken. Amen and amen.