

"RAISING UP AND LEADING OUT"
EASTER SUNDAY
April 21, 2019
John 20:19-29

Later on that day, the disciples had gathered together, but, fearful of the Jews, had locked all the doors in the house. Jesus entered, stood among them, and said, "Peace to you." Then he showed them his hands and side.

The disciples, seeing the Master with their own eyes, were exuberant. Jesus repeated his greeting: "Peace to you. Just as the Father sent me, I send you."

Then he took a deep breath and breathed into them. "Receive the Holy Spirit," he said. "If you forgive someone's sins, they're gone for good. If you don't forgive sins, what are you going to do with them?"

But Thomas, sometimes called the Twin, one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples told him, "We saw the Master."

But he said, "Unless I see the nail holes in his hands, put my finger in the nail holes, and stick my hand in his side, I won't believe it."

Eight days later, his disciples were again in the room. This time Thomas was with them. Jesus came through the locked doors, stood among them, and said, "Peace to you."

Then he focused his attention on Thomas. "Take your finger and examine my hands. Take your hand and stick it in my side. Don't be unbelieving. Believe."

Thomas said, "My Master! My God!"

Jesus said, "So, you believe because you've seen with your own eyes. Even better blessings are in store for those who believe without seeing."

One of the television programs I love to watch is "911." It was created and is produced by Ryan Murphy, who has produced many a hit TV series over the years such as "Nip/Tuck" and "Glee." I watched an interview of him recently, and this is what he said about the show.

Every episode starts from a place of "What's your emergency?" and tells the story of three or four cases that the 9-1-1 operators, police officers, and firefighters who get the calls experience. It is a 'blue skies show' focusing on people that get up every day and do good deeds while battling their own demons, but who put other people before them and create a community."

The concept for the show came from his real-life experience of calling for help when Ford, his own 11-month old son, stopped breathing in the middle of the night. The stories the writers build into the script come from the reported experiences of others.

Last week's episode touched me in many ways, but one story really got to me and I wanted to share it with you today: A pregnant woman was characterized as a "geriatric pregnancy," since she was over the age of 35. She went into early labor in a hotel and, with the help of first responders, gave birth on the floor of the elevator area of the lobby. At first all seemed well, and she delivered a beautiful baby

boy. Her husband was mesmerized by the event, and as he was handed his child, he showed immediate love for his baby and a deep love for its mother, his wife.

But then the mother went unconscious and started to bleed out. Her heart stopped. As the 911 first-responders crew scooped her up and the ambulance sped with her towards the hospital, my favorite character, "Hen," performed non-stop, gut-busting CPR on her all the way there. Her efforts were in vain, however, as the mother showed no signs of life once at the hospital. By this time in the story, I was a mess, the EMT and firefighter characters were all a mess, the husband was a mess, and frankly, nothing in nature's world made any sense.

I imagine the scene was somewhat the same the day Jesus died. The disciples and the women who loved him watched him take his last, struggling breaths there on the cross at Calvary. Maybe they heard him express his love for them and forgiveness for his tormentors. Maybe a couple of thieves died alongside him, or maybe he was all alone. Either way, I imagine Jesus was pretty lonely up there, suspended and mocked before his people.

Despite the wailing of the women and men who attended him, despite the care with which Joseph of Arimathea and other faithful ones handled his body and laid it in the tomb, and despite the fervent prayers and wishes of his friends and companions who prayed and wished it wasn't so, Jesus did not draw another breath.

There would be no CPR. There would be no frantic ambulance ride through downtown traffic to the brightly-lit Emergency Bay outside the hospital. There would be no eager resident doctors ready to save them with gadgets and fresh blood and ventilators and heart-pumping machines. Gone he was, and in the tradition of his times and religious practice, he was laid to rest in a tomb while the women prepared the essential oils and spices they would use to prepare his body for burial.

He was gone, truly gone, and then as we all know, he was GONE, truly GONE! Nowhere to be found! The tomb was empty. Their Lord had perhaps been stolen. Their Christ had maybe been moved by the Romans or the Pharisees so that no wild stories could surface that he had been raised from the dead. Their Master and leader, their Teacher and Shepherd had simply vanished, and the stories coming out of the mouths of his faithful were inconsistent, rambling, confused, and...impossible.

There was talk of an angel greeting the women at the tomb and telling them that Jesus was not there. There were rumors that the Roman guards charged with protecting the site had seen something otherworldly, fantastic, and dangerous to Caesar. They would never tell, instead pretending to have been asleep, to have not seen anything. Some people even heard that the Risen Christ had appeared to some of the disciples on the road to Emmaus or in their hiding place in the city.

The disciple, Thomas, was a party to none of these sightings. They were too good to be true and he doubted them as hysterical reactions, dreams, or just plain wishful thinking. He was chided by the others for his lack of faith, but some say that doubt is the highest expression of faith.

Most Rev. Justin Welby, the archbishop of Canterbury of the Church of England, recently caused quite a stir in his faith community when he expressed doubt about the existence of God. The International Business Times called it 'the doubt of the century,' citing the rise of atheism and the crisis of faith being experienced all across Christianity, even at the top of the church.

The article continued:

He told an audience at Bristol Cathedral that there were moments where he wondered, "Is there a God? Where is God?" Then, asked specifically if he harbored doubts, he responded, "It is a really good question. ... The other day I was praying over something as I was running, and I ended up saying to God, 'Look, this is all very well, but isn't it about time you did something, if you're there?' Which is probably not what the archbishop of Canterbury should say."

This Christian angst, this doubt, may have started with Thomas, but is evident today across our faith. I think Thomas may actually

have been the first progressive Christian, because he experienced Christ most intimately in his questions, in his doubt, and in his challenges to the prevailing narrative put before him. It was because of his questioning his Christ that Jesus proved himself to Thomas and to the other witnesses there on the day that he returned to them.

There were no recorded witnesses to the Resurrection. Most folks just assume the Resurrection story appears in the Bible's Gospel section. It does not. We have the before story and the after story, but none of the story that makes us uniquely Christian!

This is where the doubt part comes in; this is where belief takes over science. This is where miracle bridges the two. And this is where faith comes in to the Christian story again, that is, faith in practice.

There were two schools of thought in the first two millennia of the history of Christianity, one rising in the East—in Northern Africa, what is now much of Russia, and Greece, and the other gaining hold in what we would identify as Western Europe. In the East, the Christian tradition of Resurrection was universal; as Christ was raised from the dead, so is all humanity, humanity represented by the symbols of Adam and Eve.

In the artwork of this tradition, Jesus is holding onto the limp wrist of Adam, and sometimes Eve, raising them up from Hades, the keeper of the dead. Jesus is shown conquering death by trampling down the gates of Hades. He raises up humanity with him and leads

them out away from death. This is called the "Universal Resurrection" Tradition.

In the West however, the Church followed the tradition of "individual Resurrection," positing that Christ was raised from the dead alone and that belief in the Risen Christ was the way to one's own salvation. Eventually in Christianity, the Western viewpoint became the prevailing narrative for the entire faith. This is what we likely were taught if we grew up in the Western world. Our traditional creeds, hymns, and depictions of the Resurrection are all based upon this Individual Resurrection tradition.

That's kind of sad, I think. I rather like the idea that Jesus rose from death and takes all of humanity with him. It's a kinder, gentler, and inclusive way of believing. In this tradition, professing faith in Christ is well and good and helps to spread the Word and the story and the narrative, but it is not required for redemption and *no one* gets left behind. There's no litmus test for God's eternal love—we all already have it.

In Universal Resurrection tradition, the Raising Up is just half the story. It is in the Leading Out that we live into the principles and compassion of Christianity. It is in taking the limp wrist of the poor bloke beside or behind you and taking him or her with you into the light of God's love and the Spirit's bidding that carries the faith forward. In other words, the miracle is in the *doing* after the

lifting. There is no purpose to the faith in Christ as Christians, there is no purpose to the Resurrection, if only Christ gets to experience it. "Bravo for you!" we cheer him on, "but what about the rest of us? 'Look, this is all very well,' the archbishop queries, 'but isn't it about time you did something, if you're there?'"

The miracle is in the doubting, and yet acting.

The miracle is in not finding an account of the Resurrection in the Bible, and yet believing.

The miracle is in the way God cares for the broken world and finds a way to raise us all up and send us out to spread justice and compassion to the rest of the Creation.

The miracle is in the unknown.

In the episode of "911" I was telling you about earlier, the newborn baby's mother dies. She has no heartbeat. No pulse. No breathing. Nothing. Dead. Dead like Jesus was dead on Good Friday. The baby's father is bewildered and overwhelmed, but he chokes out a promise to his deceased wife that he and their baby boy will somehow make it together, with her enduring love as their constant companion.

Everyone, professional or rookie dad, is devastated. I'M devastated and I don't even KNOW any of them! Ugh. Next, the fledgling father puts his child face down on his wife's chest so the

baby will at least have one experience of his warm and loving mother that he can be told about later. It is touching and sincere.

And then the miracle, the unexplainable, the Resurrection story unfolds. Feeling the heartbeat of her tiny newborn upon her own chest, the mother's heart starts beating again. It is the helpless child's tiny spirit that raises her up and he leads her out away from Hades, away from death's door. He starts her life again. She is resurrected. I think when he hears this story time and again as a little boy and on into manhood as he tells it to his Beloved and to his children, the Universal Resurrection is actuated.

The Resurrection is one miracle. The telling of it so that it takes on a faith of its own is another. That Jesus is believed to have been Resurrected is one thing; the telling of it that fosters and furthers the Christian faith, is another. Doubting it, questioning it, acknowledging the story that sounds dubious and unlikely, breeds the very faith that gives it form.

John Dominic Crossan says it this way in his book, *Resurrecting Easter*, a book we just recently studied in adult class here at UCCPH:

[Christ would not support his resurrection] as a special, individual privilege for him alone. Christ's 'Resurrection' is something far, far greater than that. It is the Resurrection of all humanity in with, by and through Christ... For Jesus the

Kingdom is already present, but only if and when we, too, as Jesus, live in God's Kingdom. [Universal resurrection] encompasses our faith journey and our individual resurrection. We are meant to share this gift of living in the Kingdom, by participating in good works for others and our planet, and above all, loving others completely.

And, might I add to this list of his, doubting, but believing, the unexplained miracles of life. Christ has risen; Christ has risen indeed.

Happy Easter—*May It Be So.*