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The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Second Sunday in Easter, April 19, 2020
John 20:19-31

Almighty and everlasting God, grant us in this world knowledge of your truth, and in the age to come life everlasting. We pray in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is the second Sunday in Easter. Among church nerds, this Sunday is also known as “Doubting Thomas Sunday” because of the principal subject of our Gospel lesson today. Much ink has been spilled and countless hours of sermons preached about Thomas and whether or not his greatest sin seemed to be his weakness in faith as demonstrated by his doubting that the resurrected Lord did, indeed, appear to the other disciples.

So, the story goes like this. It’s Easter Sunday evening and the disciples were gathered and waiting in a house. The doors were locked because they were afraid – afraid of retribution by the Romans and afraid of harassment and arrest by the Jewish non-followers of Jesus. I imagine they were also afraid because of what had happened at the empty tomb that morning. “What in the world is going on?” they surely wondered. What are they to think of the stories told them by Mary Magdalene, Peter, and John? An empty tomb, left behind burial cloths, a vision of angels, and an appearance of the resurrected Lord to Mary? I imagine them discussing and wondering together questions such as these: *What does this mean? What will become of us? What do we do now?*

Suddenly, in the midst of these confused and frightened disciples, the once-dead-but-now-definitely-something-else Jesus appears. He grants them peace and shows the wounds in his hands and his side. Jesus then breathes the Holy Spirit upon them and grants them the authority to forgive sins. But Thomas wasn’t there that evening and when he arrived back to the group, he was incredulous in response to their tale of what happened. “What? That nuts,” he says, “Unless I see and touch him myself, I can’t believe this story.”

We know what happens next. Jesus appears again one week later – back in that same locked room with the disciples still hiding. But this time Thomas is there and he is able to see and touch for himself. And this time Thomas believes. Oh, if only he weren’t a doubter – if only he had had more faith – so goes the conventional wisdom. I think that is too simple of a criticism. Personally, I take a much more sympathetic view on Thomas and I am more forgiving of his “doubting”.

What I think is more interesting about this story this year, however, is not the perennial argument about Thomas’ merits and vices but rather the image of the disciples locked in the house, protecting themselves from real –and perceived – threats outside. This sort of sounds familiar doesn’t it? Being shut up in the house behind doors, worried about the threats, both real and imagined, if we go out.

This year, I have a different perspective of these poor souls fearfully locking themselves away. As I preach this sermon, Emma, Jonathan, and I have lived in our house under the stay-at-home orders for the past several weeks. With few exceptions (and even fewer now that we can no longer livestream worship from our church sanctuary), we rarely venture out for fear of the coronavirus pandemic. When we do go out, we put on face masks and wear vinyl gloves as protection. Even in our daily walks around the neighborhood, we are now masked and careful to cross the street to the other sidewalk should we come across another neighbor walking on the same side of the street.

To protect from unwanted viral intruders that may come to harm us, we wipe down our kitchen counters and door knobs daily with antiseptic cleanser. We wash our face masks and kitchen towels daily. We meet colleagues, friends, and partners in ministry only remotely through virtual online video conference software. And now, even our Sunday worship is being videoed from our homes in three remote locations and livestreamed over the internet. My heavens, we are locked away just like the disciples! And from behind our closed doors, we are asking ourselves the very same questions: *What does this mean? What will become of us? What do we do now?*

It seems that every day I check my usual news websites and there is at least one article about these times as a “new normal”. The writers are all attempting to articulate that the weird times we are in

now are not just some anomaly – some blip in normality that will simply go away –but rather indicate fundamental changes that have occurred not only in our physical environment but also in our culture. We shut down the economy, the nation, and our lives in merely a few weeks, but it will take a long time before we return to anything that looks like normal. For now, we are living in the in-between times – no longer what was and not yet what will be.

In one interesting article in The Washington Post, writer Maura Judkis describes the eras of time before the Coronavirus pandemic, the times of rapid social and cultural change we are in now because of active pandemic, and the times after this acute period of pandemic as: the Beforetimes, the Now, and the Aftertimes. Judkis writes this:

“We fantasize about the Aftertimes. We indulge in the illusion that they will be just like the Beforetimes – when we understood the rules and knew what to do. That we will just pick up our lives where we left them – with the familiar routines, when we will just carry on the way we had been...

But what we are oh, so slowly, beginning to realize is that the Now won’t really just stop and the Aftertimes will be different. We are in the midst of significant societal transformation and nothing will be quite the same. We will, indeed, re-engage life and our routines but things will be different. The world, our social context, and us within ourselves will have changes in fundamental ways. And everything will be just a bit different.”¹

The more I think about it, to use the term “new normal” to reference the times we are in now and the times ahead of us is totally insufficient. “New normal” feels too static and two-dimensional for the kind of dynamic changes we are experiencing and will continue to experience. In another article I read, this time in The Atlantic, writer Juliette Kayyem wrote about how we are in for a long duration of what she calls “adaptive recovery” – a time of significant societal and cultural upheaval and change. During this time, she writes that it will feel “like living through evolution in real time.” She continues: “We will swerve and pivot, become acclimated to random closures and sudden changes in testing regimens, and hope that we can box the virus in long enough to buy time for a more permanent solution.”² Kayyem then references her friend Jonathan Walton, Dean of the Divinity School at Wake Forest University, who describes this time we are in as the “now normal,” the “simple effort to live each day as if it were typical, knowing the next day will bring a new round of uncertainty.

The Now Normal. I like that – I think that better describes the times the disciples were in on that Eastertide over two thousand years ago – closed up in the house and behind locked doors. The Now Normal is also robust enough to encompass the times we are in now. These times are frightening – and it is also frightening to wonder at what lies ahead. *What does this mean? What will become of us? What do we do now?* Indeed, big changes are coming and we don’t know what the aftertimes will look like – we barely recognize and comprehend the Now Normal, for that matter.

But to us shut up in our homes, as to the disciples locked away in the house over two thousand years ago, our Risen Lord appears. He comes to us no matter where we are hiding. He comes to us no matter the shakiness of our faith. He comes to us no matter what barriers we erect. Our Risen Lord appears to us in our homes, recognizes us behind our face masks, and says to us oh so gently, “Peace be with you.” And he breathes the Holy Spirit upon us and refreshes our frightened hearts.

Amen.

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/the-new-normal-is-getting-old-fast/2020/04/15/dd02a3b2-7e7d-11ea-8013-1b6da0e4a2b7_story.html

² <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/04/after-social-distancing-strange-purgatory-awaits/610090/>