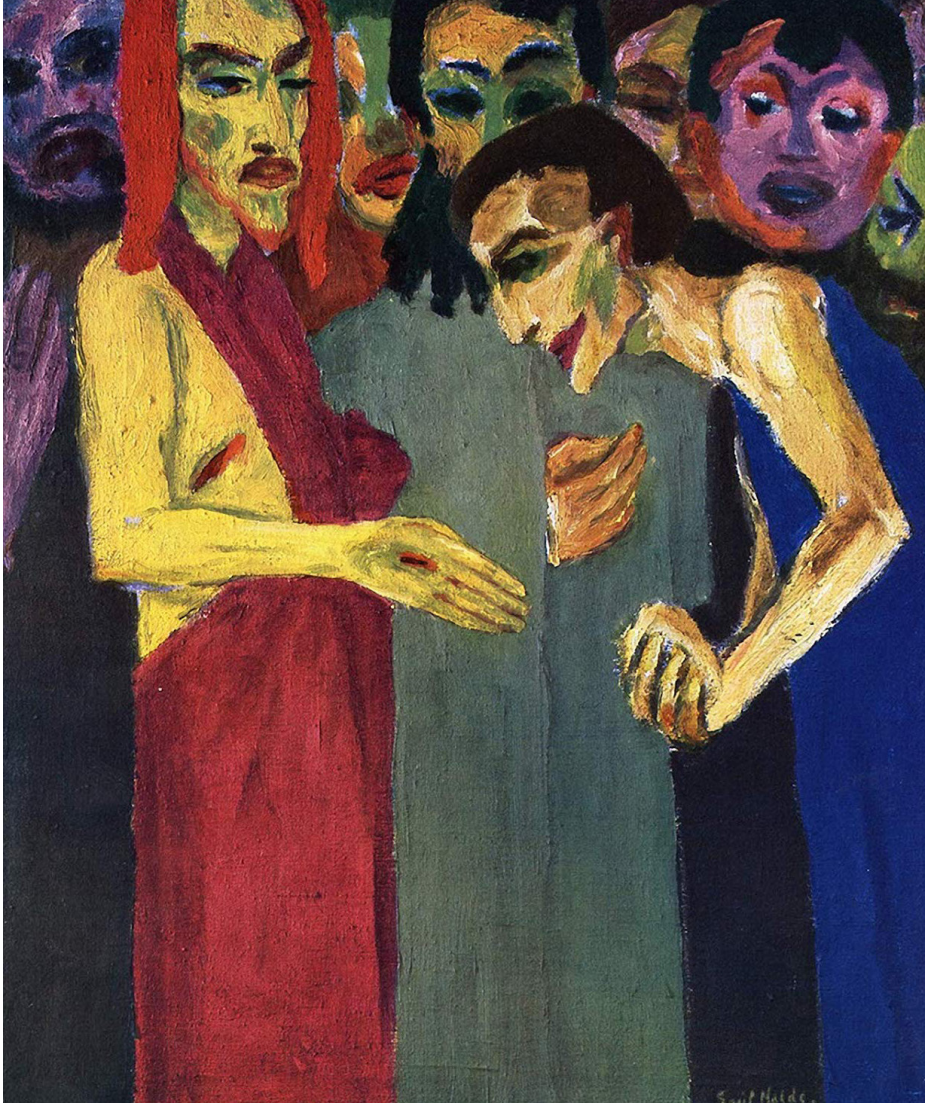


Stranger Than Fiction



A Sermon by the Rev. Kate Dunn
Associate Pastor, Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church
April 28, 2019 • Second Sunday of Easter

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." Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

—John 20:19-31

Of course they were afraid. Where else would they be, but huddled together and barricaded behind the locked doors of their hiding place?

Who could blame them? They had journeyed with him, eaten with him, found hope in him, recognized him as the Messiah, the one anointed to bring about change and truth and healing and justice to their broken world. They had left behind the familiar and known paths of their daily lives in order to venture into new, uncharted territory with him. They had loved him and felt his love for them.

Life had been exciting, transformative, full of hope and joy and astonishing possibility. And then, it all fell apart. In the past few days, they had stood helplessly by, too shocked, too terrified to even protest while this beloved friend, teacher and leader was tried and condemned by the religious and civic powers that be, torn from their midst, tortured,

mocked and brutally executed as a common criminal, an enemy of the state.

Of course they were hiding. Of course they were afraid. The next chapter in this story was painfully obvious to them. The authorities would turn their attention to the followers of this political menace, Jesus of Nazareth. They, too, would be rounded up, put on trial, condemned. They, too, might be put to death. Their lives were in danger, and they knew it.

Combined with distress over the death of their friend and fear for their own lives, they must have been stunned, aghast, speechless by this devastating turn of events. Sure, Jesus had had some enemies. He'd been chased out of a few towns, made some legal and religious authorities angry. But he'd been so loved, too.

People had flocked to him, eager to hear his stories, hungering for his healing touch, yearning to break bread with him, to be welcomed into his family, to be seen and known and loved by him. It wasn't only his disciples but the crowds that recognized him as the Messiah, the living hope for the world. "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest."

Was that just days ago? How had it all gone so wrong?

Add to all this the painful truth that they had abandoned him, their beloved friend, in his hour of need. At the end, Jesus had suffered and died alone. If he came back, how could they even bear to look him in the face, the friend they had denied and forsaken?

Of course they were hiding behind closed doors.

We've had our moments of hiding behind closed doors as well, haven't we? Those moments when everything seemed to be moving along decently and in order, and then our lives took an unexpected derailment. Perhaps we have enjoyed good health and now find ourselves struggling with a chronic illness, our symptoms making the daily activities of life such a constant struggle that it's just easier to stay inside.

Perhaps someone we love is suffering, and there doesn't seem to be anything we can do to help.

Perhaps we have thrived professionally and suddenly find ourselves unemployed, with no prospects on the horizon. Meanwhile the bills still need to get paid, and people are depending on us, and we feel paralyzed with fear that we will fail those we love.

At one point or another, all the disciples doubted Jesus.

Perhaps a relationship we thought was stable and secure proves not to be: a spouse serves divorce papers, an adult child cuts off contact, a friendship disintegrates over political differences.

Perhaps we, too, lose someone we dearly love to unfair, unkind suffering and death, and we can't bear the thought of risking a similar loss, so we hold back our love, protecting our hearts in a locked room.

Perhaps we discover truths about ourselves that we would rather ignore: that in times of trial we aren't as courageous or selfless or honest as we would like to believe.

So they huddle in their locked room, closeted with their fear and shame and dread about the future. And Jesus appears among them, demonstrating that no locked door, no barricade, physical, emotional or spiritual, can keep him out. He dispels their fear and shame with these words: "Peace be with you." He shows them the wounds in his hands and side, making clear that the resurrected body of Christ still bears the marks of human suffering.

And again, he says, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." All their past failures that they have been castigating themselves about do not seem to concern Jesus. He still has a purpose for them, and that purpose involves getting out of that locked room, going back into the world and going where he sends them. And then, "When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'"

Just think for a minute. How close do you need to be to another person to feel their breath? Pretty close, right? And how can you tell if another person is alive? If they're breathing.

These disciples know that Jesus is not just a vision, but alive and present, because he breathes on them. And all the disciples rejoice.

All except for Thomas, who wasn't there when any of this happened.

In our cultural lexicon, Thomas tends to get a pretty bad rap as the doubting disciple, as if that's a terrible thing to be. So we need to remember that Thomas had plenty of company. At one point or another, all the disciples doubted Jesus. They all abandoned him in his hour of need. They all fled.

The Gospel of John generally depicts Thomas as courageous and loyal. When Jesus hears from Mary and Martha that their brother Lazarus is dying, most of the disciples try to talk Jesus out of going to Bethany, reminding him that he was almost stoned the last time he was there. (John 11). Although Thomas agrees it's dangerous, he doesn't consider the threat of violence reason enough to stay away. "Let's go, too," Thomas tells his fellow disciples, "that we may die with him." (John 11:16). Thomas is not afraid to risk his life.

During the Last Supper, when Jesus tells his disciples, "You know the way to the place where I am going," Thomas pipes up, speaking on behalf of others who probably don't want to look stupid by raising their hand, and admits his own ignorance and confusion: "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" To which Jesus responds, "I am the way and the truth and the life."

After the disciples have fled and abandoned Jesus, after Jesus' crucifixion, death and burial, after the disciples have reconvened, hiding together in a locked room because they were afraid for their own lives, crushed by guilt, stricken by grief, numbed by disappointment—Thomas is the first to venture back out into the world. Thomas is wise enough to comprehend that, though things have not turned out as he expected with Jesus, his life will go on, and he's not going to let fear keep him from living it.

And when the disciples tell him they have seen the Lord, Thomas gives voice to his skepticism. What exactly does Thomas struggle to believe? That resurrection is possible? No, he was there when Jesus raised Lazarus. That one who died in public shame could still be the Messiah? Maybe. That wasn't part of the plan as he understood it. That the peace Jesus offered his fellow disciples, and the Holy Spirit he breathed on them, are available for Thomas too, even though he wasn't there?

Whatever the root of his disbelief, Thomas lays down the conditions that must be in place before he will believe: "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails

My hosanna is born of a furnace of doubt. — Fyodor Dostoyevsky

and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” Then Jesus returns a week later and challenges Thomas to do just that.

The name Thomas is a Greek name of Aramaic origin that means “the twin.” There has been scholarly speculation through the centuries about who Thomas’ twin might be, as none is identified in any of the gospels. Perhaps his twin is among us here.

I suspect there are many of us who wrestle with doubts of our own, and if so, we are in good company. As the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky writes, “It is not as a child that I believe and confess Jesus Christ. My hosanna is born of a furnace of doubt.”

What doubts did you bring to church today? What in our faith gives you cause for doubt?

For some of the Thomases among us, our knowledge of comparative religions and the fact that stories parallel to those we find in the Bible can be found in other cultures and traditions raises questions. We can understand how the scriptures we hold dear can be interpreted by other intelligent people as primitive myths. I suspect many of us have friends and family, people we love and respect, who think we’re a bit peculiar when it comes to this whole God thing. If we’re completely honest, sometimes we might think we’re a bit peculiar ourselves.

For other Thomases here, the creedal statements present stumbling blocks. For every person who finds sustenance from reciting the Apostles’ Creed from memory, there is likely a Thomas wrestling with each claim: “I believe in the Virgin Mary”—hmm, not quite sure I can swallow that one. How important is it? “Suffered under Pontius Pilate”—no problem there; it’s a historical fact. “I believe in the resurrection of the body.” Can someone please explain to me what “resurrection of the body” actually means?

How important is this whole creed, anyway? How much do I need to believe in order to call myself a follower of Christ?

Other Thomases among us may have no problem with comparative religions or creeds. For them, doubts arise because faith just isn’t working the way it’s supposed to be working.

Sometimes it is simply too painful to hear platitudes like, “God will never give you more than you can handle,” when that simply doesn’t feel true. Or, “God will provide,” when experience does not back up that claim. If God provides, then how is it possible that I’m about to lose my home, or that I can’t unchain myself from this addiction, or that I still don’t have a job, or that I’m not finding that special person, or that my relationship is falling apart? This is God providing?

If this story tells us anything, it is that God does not stay away from people who doubt. Jesus gives Thomas absolute freedom to experience his doubts and express them. And then, Jesus comes back for Thomas, because he loves this disciple who has always been one to speak what’s on his mind and to ask questions for clarification.

Jesus also knows that our doubts, our intelligent, questioning minds, our wonder, our curiosity, our engagement with our living, breathing faith keep our faith alive.

Do not be afraid of your doubts. Embrace them, wrestle with them, live with them, learn from them, grow from them. Accept them as gifts of the Creator God who made you in God’s image as you are, gifts that may bring your faith to an entirely new, unexpected and resurrected place. Remember that Thomas’ doubts did not keep Jesus away from him, and your doubts have no power whatsoever to keep God away from you.

When Jesus makes his resurrection appearance to Thomas, he offers him two gifts. The first is verbal. “Peace be with you,” he says. The second is tactile: “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”

What does it mean that Jesus invites Thomas to recognize him by his wounds?

It is possible that Thomas might not recognize his face or his voice; after all, Mary Magdalene mistook Jesus for a gardener, and the followers Jesus spoke with on the road to Emmaus walked and talked with him for hours without recognizing him.

But I suspect Jesus means to communicate that these wounds are an essential part of the resurrected Christ, and will be an essential part of any community that Jesus is part of. There is pain and suffering in the body of Christ, right here in this room, right outside these doors, and all around this magnificent, yet hurting planet of ours.

There is also life and strength and hope for the future. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you,” Jesus tells his disciples, commissioning them to continue his work of healing and hospitality and compassionate care.

In his book *The Wounded Healer*, Henri Nouwen writes, “A Christian community is... a healing community, not because wounds are cured and pains are alleviated, but because wounds and pains become openings or occasions for a new vision. Mutual confession then becomes a deepening of hope, and shared weakness becomes a reminder to one and all of the coming strength.”

Jesus sends us to wounded places to look for him in wounded people, and to care and love others as he loves us. Paradoxically, it is in that very act of caring for others that we may come to see and believe in the risen Lord.

How close to these wounded people and this wounded world do we need to get? Close enough to see their wounds. Close enough to feel their breath. Close enough to touch. Close enough to really care.

As God sent Jesus, now Jesus sends us, with the breath and power of the Holy Spirit. We’re in this work, this calling, this ministry, together, friends—doubts and all, seeking to live out our faith in Christian community, and to love the wounded and beloved world that Jesus loves.

And the good news is that this is exactly how we find our way out of our locked rooms, out of our prisons of fear and shame. It is through living, breathing, loving, caring Christian community that God shows us the path from fear to hope.

Audio of this sermon is available at fapc.org/sermons and via podcast.

FIFTH AVENUE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
7 West 55th Street • New York City • fapc.org



FAPCNYC



FAPC_NYC



FAPCinNYC