

He Comes to Us!

John 20:19-31: 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 and place 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 you 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.

Craig was 17 when his father left the family. Shortly after that, his devastated mother got up one morning and moved to Dallas from Long Island without her sons. Within a month Craig and

his 19-year-old brother had nothing to do but figure out how to survive on their own. Craig was a senior in high school. His brother dropped out of college and got a construction job to help support the two of them. The boys even had to empty out the family house – which was the church parsonage – by themselves. They found a cheap apartment, and in addition to his brother's income from the construction job, Craig worked in a gas station in the evenings after school. He graduated from high school. No parents were around to help him celebrate.

After high school graduation, the young men continued to work their jobs on Long Island and tried to figure out life. They never saw their father again, but they decided to visit their mom in Dallas the following Christmas. They didn't have money for a plane or bus ticket, so they decided to hitchhike. And as their luck would have it, they got stuck in a blizzard in Virginia. A state trooper stopped by to tell them that the highway was closed and there would be no vehicles coming by to pick them up. He got them dinner and helped them find cover for the night.

But Craig tells the story of waiting in the blizzard. Abandoned, broke and alone, a Bible verse came to his mind that he was forced to learn as a child. It was from Isaiah: *"Do not fear, for I am with you, you are precious in my sight and I love you. When you pass through the waters, I will be there."* He writes that on this night his life was changed. He experienced the love and peace of God coming to him.

Craig Barnes, who is now Dr. Craig Barnes, president of Princeton Theological Seminary, talks about how God came to him. When he was at the very bottom, the relentless love of God was there. Not because he was so good, but because God's love is so strong and reached out to him.

Abandoned? No, Jesus Breaks In

Abandoned, broke and alone. I wonder if that is how the disciples felt on that night behind

locked doors in that room. Mary Magdalene had said she had seen the Lord earlier that day.

And Peter and John had seen the empty tomb. But no one seemed to believe the miracle Mary said had happened. The disciples and other Christ followers were so afraid that they locked the doors. The Roman authorities had crucified Jesus with the help of their own Jewish temple leaders. They couldn't be safe on the streets or even in the temple. Where could this motley crew of Jesus followers go that was safe?

And Jesus was gone. Many of them had given up everything to follow him.

Yes – abandoned, broke and alone. That surely describes how they must have felt. That describes the reality of the situation.

And then, essentially out of nowhere, Jesus showed up. Their fears and confusion didn't keep him away. Their brokenness and anxiety didn't keep him away. Even doors they locked didn't keep Jesus away. He just showed up. Right in the middle of them.

And he didn't tell them to shape up or get some faith or to stop their moping. He just said, "Peace be with you."

Have you ever had a similar experience? Maybe you felt abandoned, broke and alone. You are going through a really tough time and a beloved friend shows up. The friend doesn't try to tell you are crazy or bad or wrong for feeling the way you do, but just puts his or her arm around you, and you can feel the peace of knowing someone is with you

It must have been a bit like this – but even more. Because this was the presence of their Lord. Jesus says it two times, in case they didn't quite catch it the first time. "Peace be with you." And then he tells them he is sending them out like God had sent him. Then he breathes on them.

As good Jews they would know the power of breath. In Genesis, God breathes life into clay and human beings are given life. In Hebrew, the breath of God is “ruach.” It is the breath that can bring life out of nothingness. Ruach. The breath of God. The breath that takes things that are dead and brings them back to life. Ruach. Ruach was given to Dr. Barnes on that blizzardy road and was given to the disciples in this passage.

Oh, the grace and the blessing of Jesus coming to them in this way!

But Thomas, one of the disciples, was not among them when this miraculous event occurred. Maybe he had the courage to go out to the grocery store for some food. Or maybe he needed a break from the heaviness. When he came back and the disciples told him what had happened, he was not buying it. He needed to see for himself, he said.

We Can Understand Thomas’s Doubts

I don’t know about you, but I can surely empathize with Thomas here. My father died a couple years ago, and if one of my sisters would have told me that he was alive and shown up in their locked bedroom after he died, I surely wouldn’t have believed it. Or have you ever had someone tell you they have seen a UFO or something like that? The person describes it in full detail and seems so certain. I surely wouldn’t believe those things unless I saw them with my own eyes.

So, one can surely understand Thomas’s doubts.

And Jesus seems to understand Thomas’s doubts, too. Because Jesus shows up again – this time when Thomas is there and this time, it seems, for the special purpose of letting Thomas know that his resurrection is true. Jesus cares about Thomas and shows up especially for him in the middle of Thomas’s doubts. And Jesus doesn’t get upset with Thomas or tell him he should have more faith. No, Jesus says what he had said before, “Peace be with you.” And, essentially,

Jesus says, “Hey, Thomas, I want to give you the chance to see for yourself. Put your hands in my side. It is me. Peace be with you!”

And then Thomas makes an incredible declaration of faith: “My Lord! My God!”

Later in John’s Gospel, in chapter 21, we will read how Jesus shows up to Peter, who may have felt deep guilt and anguish for denying Jesus three times on the night of his death. Jesus shows up at breakfast and gives Peter three chances to say he loves him.

And in Luke’s gospel, he shows up on the Emmaus road to two men talking and then again as some of the disciples were eating breakfast.

In each of these situations the resurrected Christ comes to them.

So often we think we have to do something to make Christ show up. Sometimes we think we need to pray the right way or say the right words. Sometimes we think we need to have done something good for somebody or have pure thoughts. Sometimes we think we need to be responsible and have our acts together for Christ to show up in our lives.

But over and over again in the Scriptures and in stories of God’s people, we read and hear about a Christ who shows up among people who are confused, doubting and broken. That’s what Jesus does. He shows up in the middle of messes.

Being Open to Jesus’s Presence

Yet there *is* something required of us: a kind of openness, an openness that sometimes we may not even be aware of. And sometimes this openness tends to happen when we are at the end of our ropes. When we feel stuck and aren’t sure which way to go. Sometimes this openness is

the kind of honesty that Thomas had – being very honest about where he was and what he was feeling.

Sometimes when we are the most vulnerable and the most honest – it is then we are open in ways we don't even recognize. Maybe it is because when we are at the end of our ropes that we are open in ways to the holy. Maybe it is because when we are confused and fearful and doubting we are more open to that new gift of God that is trying to be born in us and among us.

Think about it. The basis of our theology – our understanding of who God is – is that God sent God's son, Jesus, to come and dwell among us. The Word of God took on flesh and blood and moved into our neighborhoods – locked doors, fears, doubts – but none of these barriers can keep Jesus from seeking to reach for us. And our part is to say, "OK, we are here. Give us the grace to receive you."

As a pastor sometimes I hang around with other pastors. We often tell our stories. All of my closest pastor friends have stories of brokenness in their lives – divorce, struggles with children, a death of a parent or spouse, an illness that changed their lives, struggles with their faith. And most of them tell me that somewhere in those broken places they heard Christ's call. Christ showed up for them through the barrier of their fears and began to do a new thing. I mean, think about it – the president of our most prestigious seminary came to faith in the middle of a blizzard – abandoned, broke and alone.

Think about your lives. Where has Christ reached out and shown up for you? Sometimes Christ shows up for us when we are with loved ones and in nature and in times of praise and goodness and success. Those are great, aren't they? But often Christ shows up when we are disillusioned, broken, fearful and doubtful.

No matter what kind of place you are in right now – a place of joy and wellness or a place of brokenness and pain or somewhere in between – I pray you will have the grace to see Christ reaching for you. Showing up. Calling your name. Inviting you to touch his hands and side. Breathing that new life into you so you can breathe that new life where you live and among those you love. Because the Word became flesh and moved into our neighborhoods – no matter what neighborhood we are in right now.

Resurrection Light: Come into My Life

You may have noticed that we still have white up in the sanctuary and that the Easter lilies are still here. We celebrate Easter in our denomination not just on Easter Sunday, but for a 6-week season between Easter and Pentecost. The resurrection of Jesus and the gift of new life breaking into the broken places in our lives take more than one Sunday, don't they?!

So, today we are going to experience something that a few of us experienced at the Easter Sunrise Service. We are going to be led by Daniel Van Beek in inviting the resurrection light to come into the broken, fearful and doubting places of our lives.

The good news, my brothers and sisters, is that Christ is alive and comes alive to us over and over again. He shows up. May we have the grace and wisdom and openness to receive him! May we have Easter Eyes to see him. Alleluia! He is Risen Indeed!