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Community Church of Sebastopol
April 19, 2020
John 20:19-31
“Imagining Resurrection”

Today we find ourselves in an upper room with the disciples and the narrator tells us that they are terrified. They have just witnessed Jesus, their beloved friend and teacher, their visionary leader and prophet, arrested and executed by the state—the Roman Empire. Scripture says that they are gathering behind locked doors in fear, perhaps believing that the Roman officials would come for them next. I wonder how long they have been hiding behind these doors. Have they left at all? We know that Thomas is absent from the gathering at least for a moment. Perhaps they are sending people out from time to time to check on others in the community or to gather supplies while the more precarious of the disciples shelter-in-place. Are the women there with oils, offering anointing and healing to calm themselves and the community? Are they breaking bread together and washing each other’s feet like Jesus taught them, or are they so scared that they cannot eat or sleep? Have they heard the rumors that Jesus might not be gone? Do these rumors of “resurrection” feel like a conspiracy to lure them out, or a haunting, or like the whisper of hope?

It is into this closed-off, grief-filled, traumatic room that the resurrected Christ appears. And Thomas, the one often referred to as “Doubting Thomas,” isn’t there to witness Jesus standing among them saying, “Peace be with you.” Perhaps Thomas is out in the streets where stories of Rome’s great power are being woven together, with the death of Jesus as proof. Or perhaps everything has gone back to normal, as if they had never created glimpses of a new kin-dom on earth. As if the struggle for justice and Jesus’ death had been for nothing. Whatever it was that Thomas encountered in the streets and the trauma he was surviving in that moment, he did not, could not believe his friends when they told him Jesus had visited them. Thomas needed proof. He needed to see Jesus for himself.

One of the most important things I have experienced and learned about the nature of trauma is that whether in the initial experience or in post-traumatic resurfacings, trauma cuts off the part of our brain that is designed for logical and imaginative thought. Trauma actually deactivates these capacities and pulls all of our energy into survival mode. It’s why we run, or fight, or curl in on ourselves and shutdown when we are traumatized. I wonder if that’s why Thomas couldn’t believe Jesus had appeared, because Thomas was trying to survive, desperately in need of what was familiar and normal. Thomas couldn’t access the part of himself that could imagine anything beyond this terrifying uncertainty and dreadful absence.

I don’t know about you, but sometimes, like Thomas, I struggle to imagine that resurrection is possible. Especially in times like these when death is all around and God’s beloveds who are already precarious within unjust systems are made more precarious, I struggle to believe that the glimpses of resurrection, of transformation and change, are powerful enough. I wonder if that is what it felt like for the first disciples and for Doubting Thomas? Could they imagine the transformation of all that is death-dealing?

Poet Brad Aaron Modlin wrote a poem entitled, “What You Missed That Day You Were Absent From Fourth Grade.” I am going to share this poem with you now and I invite you to sink into the expansiveness of these words and images:

What You Missed That Day You Were Absent from Fourth Grade

Mrs. Nelson explained how to stand still and listen
to the wind, how to find meaning in pumping gas,

how peeling potatoes can be a form of prayer. She took
questions on how not to feel lost in the dark

After lunch she distributed worksheets
that covered ways to remember your grandfather’s

voice. Then the class discussed falling asleep
without feeling you had forgotten to do something else—
something important—and how to believe
the house you wake in is your home. This prompted

Mrs. Nelson to draw a chalkboard diagram detailing
how to chant the Psalms during cigarette breaks,

and how not to squirm for sound when your own thoughts
are all you hear; also, that you have enough.

The English lesson was that *I am*
is a complete sentence.

And just before the afternoon bell, she made the math equation
look easy.

The one that proves that hundreds of questions,

and feeling cold, and all those nights spent looking
for whatever it was you lost, and one person

add up to something.

This poem by Modlin speaks to the power of imagination that emerges when our normal routines are suspended for a moment. A fourth grader misses a day of class and when they imagine the lessons they did not learn because of their absence, they do not conceive of themselves missing a regular math lesson or spelling test. What they imagine instead, are lessons that hold the complexity of our humanity, that invite emotions and dreams, silence and play. In these new imagined lessons, they bring to voice the deepest values, questions, and longings that lie at the center of their being. The poem begs the question, “If this isn’t our experience of education and formation, why couldn’t it be?”

In the absence of structure that this student knew as normal, a whole new world of possibility emerged, a whole new imagination of what school and education could be. When our routines are disrupted, when all that we have come to know as normal is absent, what new thing rises up in its place? For the disciples, what was normal was the story that empire wins. That violence is power. That death is the cost of resistance. Thomas struggled to imagine that this story could be different. That resurrection was possible. That all that is death-dealing could be transformed. Like Doubting Thomas, when we bear witness to the world's crisis today, are we struggling to lean into the absence of all that is familiar and imagine something new?

In this shelter-in-place Easter season, we too are invited to imagine a new world. I, like many of you, find myself longing for a return to normal, despite an awareness that we will be experiencing the impacts of COVID-19 long after shelter-in-place ordinances are lifted. But what if resurrection means that we will work to not return to normal? That we will actually take it on as a ministry, to do things differently? What if this time is an invitation to imagine the story differently, to lean into what is rising up in the absence of normal? I believe the question before us this Easter season is: Can we imagine the transformation of all that is death-dealing?

Can we imagine a world where the government prioritizes elders?

Can we imagine an economy that empowers collective care by implementing paid sick days for all?

Can we imagine the beauty of growing food for our communities?

Can we imagine a world that releases everyone from jails and detention centers and never puts people behind bars again?

Can we imagine an economy that prioritizes relationships and human connection over production?

Can we imagine...

Let's spend this Easter season writing our own poems and title them, "What You Missed That Day You Sheltered-In-Place." What imagination comes to voice in these new poems? What resurrection questions and visions will you offer for the transformation of all that is death-dealing?

Jesus appeared to the disciples and into this traumatized place, and one of the first things he did was breathed with them. Perhaps Thomas' inability to first believe that Christ had risen was because he missed this moment of breath. You see beloveds, I think Jesus knew a thing or two about trauma. When we are triggered and experiencing trauma, one of the resources we have to return to ourselves is breath. While trauma shuts down our capacity for logical and imaginative thought, breath opens up pathways that reconnect us to the bigger picture.

COVID-19 is a traumatic experience that the entire world is encountering together. In the chaos it can be tempting to pray for everything to go back to normal, but if we listen closely to the good news on that first Easter, it's that in the absence of normal, resurrection occurs and we are called to imagine the story differently. God breaks in and the Spirit breathes with us until we can imagine that death is not the end of the story and that the world can be the kin-dom we have dreamt about.

I recognize that we are each experiencing the trauma of these days in both collective and personal ways and yet, I believe that part of what Easter does is call us to imagine. So perhaps we need our own moments of breathing together in order to live into our callings as resurrection people. To help us on our way, let us close with a practice of prayerful, rhythmic breathing. I will guide us through a minute of breathing. As I do so, I invite you to repeat the words Thomas declared when he encountered Christ risen from the dead. “Alleluia” on the in breath and “My Lord and My God” on the out breath. As you breathe deeply, taking in these words, may the declaration, “My Lord and My God” be a witness to all that was thought impossible, now imagined, and brought to life.