

Acts 2:14a,22-32
1 Peter 1:3-9
John 20:19-31
Psalm 16

The Second Sunday of Easter
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island
April 19th, 2020
The Rev. Karen Haig

Happy Easter!

It was quite a different experience of Holy Week and Easter this year, wasn't it? While Holy Week wasn't different in terms of being busy – doing things virtually takes much more out of me than doing them “in person” – but it was a very different kind of busy. Holy Week and Easter are the times we welcome more people through our doors than any other, but this year, our church was mostly empty. And still, we made the journey and we made it together.

I realized this last week that I have been focused on Holy Week since early March. That's not really so unusual either, but this year, we weren't planning Maundy Thursday menus, rehearsing music or bringing the big Celtic cross into the church. We weren't doing any of the “normal” things we usually do.

This year, I found myself asking the question: how will we get through it? How will we do this? Should we try to have services from inside the church? How much of each service would we/could we do without our congregation present, together? And because our lives changed from week to week, we wondered what we'd even be allowed to do by the time Holy Week came around. Should we offer liturgies that you could do alone in your own homes, or should we try to gather, as best we could, as a community worshipping in the same ways at the same times? How best to live into the journey of dying and rising with Christ, and how to do that without gathering together? Well, we learned a lot, we did the best we could and now we are on the other side. We “made it” through Holy Week. Time to get back to normal.

I know I'm not the only person thinking about getting back to normal. And these days, that's the lens I see this story about Jesus and the disciples through. Their “normal” had been turned upside down, just like ours has, and there, huddled in fear in that locked room, they must have been wishing they could get back to normal too.

“When it was evening on that day...” that day was Easter Sunday, the day Magdalene had encountered the risen Lord, *“When it was evening on that day...the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the authorities...”* The rest of the disciples had gathered together, but it wasn't for a grand Easter celebration. They had gone there to hide, because they were terrified that the authorities who had crucified Jesus were coming for them next. But Thomas wasn't there. We don't know where he was, but we do know that his absence meant he didn't share in the very real experience of the risen Christ when Jesus came among them to give them God's peace. So when the disciples told him that Jesus had come to them, Thomas wanted

to see him too. “Unless I see the mark of the nails... and put my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

And so we call him Doubting Thomas. The one who had to see with his own eyes, the one who wanted to have his own experience of the risen Lord, is called the doubter. I’m not sure how that happened. I am glad to know that doubt is a very real part of faith and that even the disciples were afraid and had their doubts, but what seems more important to me is that Thomas wanted the same experience Magdalene and the other disciples had had. He wanted to see Jesus.

On the very next Sunday, the Sunday following Easter Sunday when all the disciples had gathered Jesus came again to them, and again he gave them God’s peace. And as soon as he offered that peace, he called Thomas to him, and gave Thomas his heart’s desire. Thomas wanted to see Jesus, and to let God’s peace settle in and around him. Jesus didn’t berate Thomas for not believing. Thomas wanted what the other disciples had received – to see Jesus again and to experience his peace. Thomas had a deep longing for Jesus. It’s true for us too, especially in times of unspeakable uncertainty and fear. In times that are not “normal” we, like Thomas, long for Jesus.

It occurs to me that our longing to get back to normal might be misplaced. I wonder how our lives would feel different if what we were longing for was Jesus, rather than “normalcy?” Nothing would ever be “normal” again for Thomas and the other disciples because Jesus had died and was risen, and that changed everything. Death itself had been turned to life and everything, all of creation was different and anything was possible. God’s unending creative force was made known in the resurrection and it is still being made known all around us. Chicks are hatching, buds are swelling, seeds are sprouting, God’s creative force is alive, everywhere.

So rather than spend our attention and energy and longing on “getting back to normal,” I think if we can shift that longing for “normal” to longing for Jesus, it will allow us to think about whether the “normal” we knew in January is really the normal we want to return to. I think if we can shift our longing to a longing for Jesus, we may begin to see the parts of our “normal” life that might best be left behind.

It used to be normal to think we could have anything we wanted when we wanted it. But as soon as we thought that might not be true, the “normal” response was to buy up all the toilet paper and hand sanitizer we could find. Is THAT me, me, me, mine, mine, mine a “normal” we want to return to? As soon as the shelter in place order came, most of the office workers “went to work” remotely, still doing their jobs and receiving their paychecks while restaurant workers and housecleaners and ticket takers and shopkeepers could no longer work, were no longer paid, and many will likely not have work to go back to. People in our own congregation have lost their jobs and some of them are wondering how they will pay their rent. Is that a “normal” we want to return to?

I think rather than asking ourselves when will we get back to normal, a better question would be to ask what parts of the old normal do we want to carry into God's future and what parts would be better left behind?

Our church is closed, but our hearts are open, more open I would contend, than before we closed our doors. People are connecting in ways they've never connected before. People are caring for each other in ways we've never cared before. People who can, are sending money to me to give to people who need it. People are making masks for immigrant and migrant communities, people are helping and giving and loving in ways they might never have imagined. THAT is the fruit of longing for Jesus.

Yes, we'd love to be able to visit people who are in the hospital, yes, we'd like to go to the market without wearing a mask, yes we want to see our families, hold our grandchildren, visit our local shops and restaurants, of course we want to be "normal." And at some point, the precious things we long for so deeply will come back to us. But I think the things that are most precious have a lot more to do with relationship – all of our relationships with everyone and with all of creation – than they have to do with convenience and privilege. One of the beautiful things we are learning is that we are all deeply connected, which is what Jesus said all along. It is in our vulnerability and maybe even our fear that God is cracking hearts open and allowing us to look at the suffering around us and do what we can to turn suffering into love. It's why we sit at the foot of the cross. Because if we're unwilling to experience the suffering and vulnerability of the ones Jesus called "the least of these", we won't have the desire to change things. God's presence will always be found in the midst of suffering. God promises to show up and be present in the least expected places... think of the unspeakable love found in the cross. That's the last place we'd expect the God of everything to show up, and it's where God shows up in the most radically authentic way, the face of love in the midst of unspeakable suffering.

The coronavirus has changed us in some ways that we may want to let go of, but it's changed us in some beautiful ways too. We've learned that we are all vulnerable – not just to the virus but to fear and loneliness and heartache and grief. We can wear masks and stay at home, we can do the prudent things we've been asked to do to care for ourselves and each other, but we cannot deny the fact that we are all vulnerable. And in recognizing our vulnerability, we have recognized our connectedness.

When Jesus came to the disciples, he came to bring God's peace. He gave peace to the disciples and he gives peace to us too. It's not the sort of peace that dissipates hardship or delivers us from difficult or even terrifying situations. It's the sort of peace that settles around us and in us, no matter what the situation. That peace is God's promise to us, and it comes in our longing for Jesus. Amen.