

The Grief of the Upper Room

by

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John 20:24-29

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."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.

He was not there when Jesus came.

Just before this verse, we hear about the disciples on the evening of the resurrection of Jesus. Mary Magdalene has come to them and told them about how she talked to Jesus outside his tomb, about how Jesus has risen.

Yet, the followers of Jesus are still just hiding in the very room where Jesus had, days before, broken bread with them. They sit in that room, licking their wounds, paralyzed, wondering what went wrong. Sure, this woman with a questionable past has said she's seen him. But let's face facts. He's been dead three days.

But then—Jesus appears to the disciples in that locked room, breathes on them, gives them the Spirit, sends them out to go and forgive sins, and...disappears.

Before too long, Thomas comes back. And the disciples are quick to tell Thomas, "Jesus has returned!"

I have often wondered why Thomas wasn't there.

Perhaps he had gone to try and take his mind off the death of his teacher, his friend.

Maybe he wanted to pretend for an hour or so that everything he had dedicated his life to for the past few years was not a waste.

Perhaps Thomas just wanted a reprieve from the aching sadness, the consuming emptiness that must have filled that upper room.

Like Thomas, we can be good at running, at escaping. We leave our own upper rooms of our despair over the failed exams, that relationship that didn't last, the test that came back positive, the seemingly ever present panic of living through this global pandemic.

We humans are very good at running from and numbing our pain. We can turn to predictable vices, but more often we numb ourselves with more acceptable distractions, like TV and obsessive control over food, meaningless conversation or good grades or busyness. Anything to desensitize our emotions.

Because it just hurts too much.

At this moment—there are plenty of painful, anxious, overwhelming feelings to numb. And many of our predictable escape hatches are gone. Faced with our own mortality, anxiety for our lives and the lives of those we love, we can find plenty of motivation to run, to numb, follow Thomas right out the door.

And so we can understand a bit of what Thomas might be feeling as he returns to the upper room, to the depression of those four walls.

The disciples tell Thomas what Mary said—that Jesus is risen. That they themselves have seen him! Thomas's reaction? "Yeah right." "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands... and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

Thomas, understandably, wants proof. He has settled into a view of the world, a plausibility structure, in which good news is simply not possible. Maybe you know someone who lives in that place. Maybe today you are someone who lives in that place.

A week passes. The disciples and Thomas remain in the upper room for a week, which leads us to believe they hadn't done much in terms of spreading the news of Jesus' message (like Jesus had told them to).

The 11 disciples too hid in their pain and fear. Even if Jesus had really appeared to them, even if Thomas is just high maintenance, the experience of watching this one they love be crucified would naturally result in collective, communal trauma.

So they hid out together. Sitting in their pain. Hiding in their grief.

I don't know about you, but I've seen plenty of social media posts and emails and articles about how, because we have to stay home right now, we have no excuse to not do the things we've been putting off! Things like writing that novel, starting that exercise regimen, learning a new language, reading those books on your nightstand, or spending time with family.

Because it is so easy to have quality family time when none of you have chosen to be there!

I can't tell you how many parents I have heard from who feel as though they are failing, failing at loving their children in this impossible time. There's a comic that went around Facebook that asks questions in a flow chart. And each question leads to "is your child on fire?" you then answer yes or no. If yes, the chart goes to "put them out, maybe" and then to "Awesome—you're doing great it will be okay." If answered no the question "is your child on fire?" then it goes directly to "you're doing great. It will be okay!"¹

While there are those for whom greater productivity at this time is life-giving, I also wonder if we need to cut ourselves some slack on the expectation to try harder. Like the disciples, we are experiencing communal trauma.

And trauma affects us, no matter how much we wish it wouldn't.

¹ Comic by Claire Fry. See page 7 below.

Two weeks ago, even amid the beginning of this crisis in our area, the New York Times published an article titled: "Stop trying to be productive" by Taylor Lorenz.

We read,

"It's tough enough to be productive in the best of times, let alone when we're in a global crisis," said Chris Bailey, a productivity consultant, and author. "The idea that we have so much time available during the day now is fantastic, but these days it's the opposite of luxury. [those of us lucky enough to have homes] are home because we have to be home, and we have much less attention because we're living through so much."²

Wounds of the heart and psyche are often invisible to the naked eye. In Thomas. In the disciples. In us.

And yet, amid despair, confusion, frustration, doubt, anger, bitterness, sadness, paralysis—just like in our text today—Jesus shows up.

Jesus just appears in the midst of all of that emotional agony. The disciples can't conjure him up. But Jesus appears, saying to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side."

Jesus returns with scars, the scars that bring about salvation, and *we* are invited, not just to see, but to touch.

Jesus appears in our own suffering, refusing to let us hide from that which scares us. And, I find, more often than not, Jesus doesn't just take away the pain, even though that is often what I would prefer.

² Lorenz, Taylor. "Stop Trying to Be Productive." *The New York Times*, Apr. 1, 2020. www.nytimes.com/2020/04/01/style/productivity-coronavirus.html

Instead, Jesus says, "touch my wounds, see how I am broken *like* you, willingly broken so that I can be *with* you." Emmanuel, God with us.

Rather than being afraid of Thomas' questions and doubts, Jesus meets him there. In Thomas' uncertainty and suspicion, Jesus meets him.

I wonder, when we run away from pain and hide ourselves from suffering, if we miss Jesus. Because it is through love that willingly undergoes profound suffering that Jesus meets us.

Jesus shows up in the midst of our despairing upper rooms, comes through our locked doors, and invites us to awake to the painful places in our lives and in our world.

It would be nice if the miracle of the Resurrection could simply launch us into instantaneous, hopeful, productive action. But like the disciples, it seems the Good News is that the power of the Resurrection found its way into the disciples through suffering, not in spite of it.

Amen

