

Sermon
Second Sunday of Easter
April 16th, 2023
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Rev. Victoria Scott
Readings: ACTS 5:27-32; PSALM 118:14-29; REVELATION 1:4-8; JOHN
20:19-31

Lutheran pastor and author Nadia Bolz-Weber says this about grief:

"...when someone dies or we experience a loss, we don't get to control the guest list. Grief sticks their foot in the door and...waves all his friends in."

Grief does do that. It opens the door and invites in all our grief. It opens the door and invites in our struggles and our pain. It opens the door and invites in all our fears and vulnerabilities. And, if we don't tend to that grief – to our struggles, and pain, and fear and vulnerabilities – we end up transmitting all of that into the world. Tremendous damage is done when we do this. We hurt ourselves and others...

Richard Rohr says you can tell a lot about someone by what they do with their pain: do they transmit it, or do they transform it.

Today's Gospel passage – often referred to as the story of Doubting Thomas – is actually about what Jesus invites us to do with those difficult feelings. It's about transforming our pain – our doubts, our fears, our questions – through love and connection and compassion and relationship.

Take another look at the story as John tells it. It's Easter evening. The women saw the empty tomb early that morning. Mary claims to have seen Jesus. As the day draws to a close the rest of them are locked in a room, fearful after what has transpired in the last days. Wondering what the repercussions will be, given their association with Jesus. In their fear – pain, grief, vulnerability – they put up barriers. Jesus gets past that barrier, through the locked door. And what does he do? He breathes on them. He says peace be with you – twice, in case they missed it the first time! And, he says "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

Jesus is saying to them, you need to get out of this room, and into the world. He's saying I've been showing you these last years that you need to choose love and connection and relationship, now you get out there and do the same thing. He is breathing enough peace, enough new life, into them so that they will be able to do that. He is saying, trust me. He is saying, I'll go with you as you find your way out there. And, he says this to us, too.

Believe. It's a loaded word these days. It has come to be more about a ticket "in" or "out" than anything else. In or out of heaven. In or out of churches and communities. The Greek root behind our word "believe" is

“pist”. “Faith” is usually the noun chosen in translations, and “believe” is the verb. But the Greek has more nuance, and a range of meaning from trusting in something or someone, relying on something or someone, to believing something is true.

Theologian John Douglas Hall writes that in our time religious faith has come to mean intellectual certainty. Christian faith has come to mean believing certain ideas about God and Jesus to be true. But faith, Hall says, is more a matter of trusting God. Christian faith is more a matter of trusting Jesus Christ – choosing, following his way of being in the world – than believing ideas about Jesus Christ. If we hear Jesus say to Thomas “trust me”, it changes things, from formula and certainty to a way of relating, and a way of being.

Rohr has commented on this, too, saying:

“[Jesus] said ‘follow’ me. But instead of following Jesus, we spent most of our energy worshipping Jesus, and then arguing about the form of worship, when he never said ‘worship me’ to begin with. He said ‘follow me’. That is an entirely different agenda.” Richard Rohr also said: “Worship of Jesus is rather harmless and risk free...actually following Jesus changes everything”.¹

¹ <https://abqecc.wordpress.com/2014/08/29/jesus-as-paradox-richard-rohr/>

When we make faith about intellectual certainty, it's like being in that locked room. It becomes about wondering and worrying whether we're the ones inside or outside. It becomes a formula for division and exclusion, wondering about who to let in and who to keep out. If we make faith about trusting in the way of Jesus, there is all kinds of room for doubt, room for questions, and there is a way of life that is transformative.

Jesus talks about sins and forgiveness in today's Gospel passage. This is about trust, too. If we take a formulaic approach to sin – if this, then that – it becomes all about judgement and exclusion – both of ourselves, and others. We end up putting our energy into judging what we can see on the outside, instead of putting it into connection and relationship. We end up trusting in power and control, rather than trusting in the power of love. Eugene Peterson, in "The Message" makes this very clear in his translation of these verses about sin and forgiveness as this:

"Receive the Holy Spirit," he said. "If you forgive someone's sins, they're gone for good. If you don't forgive sins, what are you going to do with them?"

This points us to trusting that we only know part of what's going on in the world. It points us to a place of trusting that God is with us, working in and through us, even when we can't quite see what's going on. This transforms so many situations. So many feelings...

Faith. Belief. These are a process – a process of transformation. That process is not about being certain, not about being without doubt, but about being transformed by love and relationship and connection. This is the way of Jesus.

I often feel the distrust of me as an Anglican clergyman. I am painfully aware of the baggage associated with churches and Christian institutions, and with the damage done through messages of exclusion and harsh judgement, with messages about guilt and unworthiness. The way of Jesus is the opposite of those things: it's connection, not exclusion. It's compassion, not judgement. It's love not guilt and unworthiness. And it is connection, compassion and love that transform pain, and fear, and vulnerability. It's connection, compassion and love that will transform our world. I give thanks for the connections, and the compassion and love that are tightly woven into the fabric of Ascension.

This is the good news of the Resurrection. God chose to remain in relationship with us even though humanity rejected connection and relationship in Jesus. Jesus, with the disciples in today's Gospel passage, offers a profound invitation to trust that relationship and connection are stronger than death. Stronger than power and control. Jesus breathes that same Spirit into us. Jesus says to us, today more than ever, trust me that love is the way. Jesus says to us, today more than ever, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." This is our future: to be signs of love in the world. To make space for ourselves and others to feel all the feelings – doubt, fear, vulnerability – and to transform those feelings through connection and relationship and love. May it be so. In Jesus name. Amen.