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## *The Jesus Who Meets Us Where We Are*

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**A sermon by the Reverend Canon Beth Knowlton**  
**Easter 2B**  
**John 20:19-31**

The day had started out like any other day for Ted and Susan. Ted had gone to work at the construction site, Susan had stayed home with the kids. They never imagined they were going to end the day at Northside Hospital. Ted was under forty, never had a sick day in his life, yet he collapsed on the job. By the time Susan arrived at hospital he was already gone. As her life tipped quickly into an alternate reality, I met her in the quiet room. There were a few other people there. The friends from the worksite had gotten there before her. They all waited until the doctor came in. He quickly got to the point. Ted was gone. It had been quick and painless. But it was irreversible. There was nothing they could do.

I sat with them for awhile as they struggled with disbelief, shock, horror. After what seemed like an eternity, Susan asked to go back and see Ted. I took her back to the room that had been carefully prepared and watched Susan try to come to grips with her new life. The life without Ted. It was, as you can imagine, heart wrenching. Susan grasped his hand, touched his face, and wailed with abandon. Eventually she quieted, and sat, still holding his hand, with tears streaming down her face.

We had not been there more than thirty minutes when her pastor arrived. He burst into the room and enfolded her in his arms. She started wailing anew. She asked, "How can this be?" "I just saw him this morning?" "This can't be my life." "I don't want this to be my life." Then the pastor looked into her eyes and said, "Susan, you need to stop this." "God wants you to be strong right now. You have those two boys at home, and you can't let them see you this way. You need to let them see that you know that Ted is in heaven." "It will be hard, but no more tears." "Just believe."

As a chaplain, you are called to be present. And typically you defer if and when someone's pastor shows up. This one wasn't going anywhere, so after a bit of time, I quietly slipped out. I never saw Susan again, but I have often thought of her. I remember her courage and admire her ability to be present to her grief, to name the horror of what she had just experienced. And I hope she found a way forward into her new life. Her life as a widow.

I have also often thought of her pastor. I do not know what church he was from and have blocked the memory of his face. While I trust in his good intentions, it is almost impossible for me to remember him and not feel angry. How could he possibly have expected her to "snap out of it" to "be strong" less than thirty minutes after the entire foundation of life had shattered before her. And why did he see her tears as weakness? As unbelief? Did God really expect her to simply shrug her shoulders? Meekly accept the unthinkable?

If we believe the appearance of Jesus to Thomas, I have to think Susan would have been given a bit more time. A bit more grace before moving to a deeper confidence in God's presence.

We hear this story of Thomas always on the heels of Easter resurrection. We hear it after Mary Magdalene has experienced the Risen Christ--after she has mistaken her Lord for the gardener. But somehow Mary doesn't get the reputation of Thomas. Because there is no passage of time between her confusion and sadness and Jesus calling her name, we don't know

how she would have felt had she gotten the news of the resurrection secondhand.

The other disciples are left off the hook as well. Which is frankly even more surprising, when you think about it. They got the word from Mary Magdalene that she had seen the Lord. But they didn't move into action. They are locked away in fear.

But then we have poor Thomas, mislabeled through the centuries as "the doubter." He wasn't in the room when Jesus came and merely asked for the same thing everyone else had already gotten. Up until this point in the story, no one has believed Christ was risen until they experienced it in the flesh. Mary hears her name, the other disciples see his hands and his side. He breathes on them and gives them the gift of peace. Jesus does not arrive in the room with the disciples and given them a lecture about why they should have trusted Mary Magdalene's account. He meets them where they are.

He does this in all the appearances. Whether at the tomb, locked away in a room, walking down the road to Emmaus, or cooking breakfast on the shore, Jesus goes to where they are and offers himself.

Jesus doesn't call Thomas on the carpet either. His first words are a direct response to Thomas' desire to become a believer. He has told the disciple he will not believe unless he can see the mark of the nails and trace their outlines with his fingers. Jesus comes among them, offers peace and then says 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' confession follows the offer. We don't even know for sure whether Thomas did touch Jesus. It may be that simply the offer of Jesus' presence was sufficient.

It must be the next line that has caused so much judgement of Thomas. Jesus says, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." But I do not hear a reprimand here. I hear a statement of truth. It is a blessing if we are able to believe something before we experience it. It is a statement of hope for us, not a demand. But a blessing is not the same thing as a required faith position. A blessing is something that is gifted to us. Our response, should we receive it is gratitude, hopefully not entitlement. It is hard to accept that it is normative, or frankly typical if the disciples are any sort of test case.

The reality is few of us can absorb tragedy and life altering circumstances without missing a beat. We need time to grieve and to cry. We need time to ask the hard questions. We may need more time than others think is necessary, or even faithful. But, I find nothing in scripture that says that this is a position contrary to faith. If anything, it is often the invitation to a new and deeper expression of faith. It is when we find our illusions shattered and our expectations thwarted that we have to look for God in a new way.

The people that I have encountered who are the most grounded in belief, often surprise me when I learn the trials they have endured. Violence, illness, disappointment. But when they speak of their challenges, they rarely tell me that it was easy. Rather, they tell me they were surprised by just how present God was to their grief, their questions, and their anger. Sometimes, they sound like they were downright demanding.

We are invited to be pretty demanding. We are able to bring all of our rage and disappointment to the table and ask God to transform it. We can ask to see the mark of the nails to assist us. And in that vulnerability, that is often when God shows up most powerfully to us. Not because God had been absent. But because we have needed to readjust our seeing. We need to hear our name to let the gardener become the face of the Beloved. We need to let fear yield to the peaceful breath of the Holy Spirit to see the Risen Christ. Thomas can be our model, and a positive one at that. We need not fear our doubts, but embrace them and offer them to the Risen Christ.

We may find ourselves today feeling like Thomas. We may have come to church this morning because even a few days after Easter we are already wondering what the Alleluias have to offer us today. Thomas tells us this is okay. Even a mere week later, we are allowed to invite the Risen Christ into the places in our hearts that feel locked away in fear.

And if today you are not feeling a particular struggle, that is honored as well. Give thanks for that blessing. Because that is what it is. A blessing and a gift. But do not forget Thomas either. Do not judge Thomas. Because even if we have the gift of belief today, it is likely that in the course of our lifetime we will find ourselves in places of disbelief. We will find ourselves in rooms we never wanted to be in with the ground shifting below our feet. And Jesus promises to show up. To offer us what we need to move towards belief and away from fear. That is the promise of the gospel and it comes that we may have

life in his name. An Easter life, full of the joy of resurrection.

Amen

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