

Love Is Come Again
The Rev. Micki Shirey
John 20: 19-31
The Second Sunday of Easter
Sunday, April 11, 2010

*Now the green blade rises from the buried grain;
Wheat that in dark earth for many days has lain;
Love lives again, that with the dead has been:
Love is come again like wheat that rises green.* (New Century Hymnal 238)

Those of us who don't preach very often, preach on a lot of Sundays-after: the Sunday after Christmas or the Sunday after Easter. I'm okay with it, really. I'm right where I want to be. I spend a lot of time with people in the aftermath of life-changing events. It is a space filled with the question, "what will happen next?" or "now what will we do?"

I think Thomas was in that space on the first day of the week when he was unable to comprehend the possibility that his friends had seen the risen Jesus. He had reached a depth of hopelessness where it was impossible for him to take in what Mary Magdalene and the other disciples were saying.

We don't know a lot about Thomas. The biblical record tells us very little, but we can make a few educated guesses about some of what Thomas may have experienced.

We can surmise from gospels that Thomas, like the other disciples, recognized something in Jesus that caused him to leave everything he knew to follow an itinerant teacher.

I've met one or two spiritual leaders who've caused me to think, "I'd follow you anywhere." For me, they're the sort of teachers who bring God into clearer focus. These teachers not only seem closer to God themselves, but also cause me to feel closer to God when I'm in their presence. I'm energized when I'm with them and my ideas about how I want to serve God suddenly flow freely. For a few hours, the path of following God feels both clear and immediate. Although these fleeting experiences haven't risen to the level for me of leaving everything to follow someone, I'm always grateful for these rare moments because they give me a small glimpse into how remarkable Jesus' presence must have been.

After acting on his impulse to follow Jesus, Thomas was a witness to his ministry. He heard Jesus teach and preach. He witnessed healings and miracles. He ate with Jesus and spent time in close relationship with this teacher who caused him to feel closer to God; who made the path feel both clear and immediate for him.

Then, just as quickly as it began, it all started to unravel.

In John's gospel things begin to unravel for Jesus when he raises Lazarus from the dead. This part of the journey takes him and the disciples back into the country which has been most hostile to his ministry. In fact it's Thomas who bravely says, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." (Jn 11:16)

But by the time that Jesus is giving the disciples his final teaching at their Passover meal before he's betrayed; Thomas' confidence is beginning to falter. When Jesus tells the disciples that they all know the way to the place where he's going, Thomas says, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" (Jn 14:5)

Thomas is depending on Jesus to always be there to show him the way, to bring God into clearer focus and to illuminate the path. As with all good teachers, Jesus' desire is for Thomas—and all of us—to learn that everything we need is within us.

*In the grave they laid their Love whom hate had slain,
Thinking that their Love would never wake again,
Laid in the earth like grain that sleeps unseen:
Love is come again like wheat that rises green.*

Today's gospel reading picks up right where we left off last week. Earlier in the day, Mary Magdalene told the disciples that she'd seen the risen Lord. So what did they do? They locked the doors! Quite simply, they were petrified. If Jesus could be betrayed and executed, surely they were next.

And so Jesus comes to them as he always does when his followers are most paralyzed by fear. You see, throughout the gospels, the thing that most gets in the way of God's purpose in the world and God's purpose in our lives is fear.

So why did they see him? Why could they see the risen Jesus? I think they saw him because something in their experience of him before the crucifixion told them that it was possible. They saw the risen Jesus because they expected to see him.

Marcus Borg in his book *Jesus A New Vision* reminds us that there are times when we approach the gospels and the Jesus story that we as modern people—or post-modern people—must suspend our scientific worldview for a time and accept that Jesus and his culture were open to what Borg calls “the world of Spirit.”

He describes the “world of Spirit” as “another dimension or layer or level of reality in addition to the visible world of our ordinary experience” (Borg 25-26). Almost every culture before ours, he writes, believed as absolutely in the existence of this world of Spirit as most of us absolutely believe in its non-existence! In other words, both we in our time and the disciples in their time believe in the worldview in which we're steeped.

Jesus, Borg says, was a particularly powerful mediator between the “world of Spirit” and “this world.” These mediators were something that the disciples culturally took for granted. Jesus was not the only teacher, prophet, healer, exorcist, and wonder-worker they had encountered, but, he is the one we're still talking about.

Dewitt Jones was a photographer for National Geographic for many years. He talks about the fact that he, like most of us, was raised with the maxim “I'll believe it when I see it.” His photography taught him to be open to something different. The more he looked at the world through his camera; he learned a new maxim, one that said, “If I believe it, then I will see it.” “Vision controls our perception, and perception controls our reality,” Jones says.

I believe the disciples saw the risen Jesus because they expected to see him.

*Christ came forth at Easter, like the risen grain,
Jesus, who for three days in the grave had lain,
Quick from the dead the risen One is seen:
Love is come again like wheat that rises green.*

The “now what do we do” of this part of the Church year—this life after-Easter—for me, is always a call to action. We're not called as Christians to understand resurrection, but we are called to believe in it and to respond to it.

Thomas saw something that he needed to see when he saw the risen Jesus, something that, according to later Christian tradition, inspired him to discover and accept his own gifts and to continue the work of the gospel.

There are writings attributed to Thomas such as the Gospel of Thomas and the Acts of Thomas which didn't make their way into the canon of Christian scripture which, none the less, are evidence of a community within the early Church inspired by Thomas' teaching, witness, and ministry in response to his teacher, Jesus of Nazareth. In India, Thomas is believed to have brought Christianity to what is now the southwest province of Kerala where there remains an indigenous, ancient Christian church, the Mar Thoma Church.

Jesus dream for Thomas it would seem was realized. Thomas discovered the love and hope in Jesus' resurrection that brought him back from despair, and inspired him to discover the gifts he'd always had within himself to share God's love and hope with a broken world.

This is God's dream for us as an Easter people:

*When our hearts are wintry, grieving, or in pain,
Christ's warm touch can call us back to life again,
Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been:
Love is come again like wheat that rises green.*