

New Life behind Closed Doors – Reflection on John 20: 19-31

Debbie Stockdale, April 18, 2021

Part of what I do as pastoral care minister is talk with folks. Sometimes people call me. Sometimes I call them just to check in and see how things are going. As I've talked with people over the past weeks, I've noticed a pattern developing. Many of us are fed up with this pandemic and I hear people say it is becoming harder to dredge up the energy to do the things that help keep our spirits up.

I was on a zoom call this week for clergy folk in Chinook Winds and the speaker, Rev. David Robertson was talking about this very thing. He and his wife, Susan Lukey, are in ministry with High River United Church and know something about trauma and how to come through to the other side, having lived with their church and community through the flood experience in 2013 when High River suffered some of the most severe devastation. He said: Self care is hard work and when we are tired and feeling low it feels like just one more thing to feel guilty about not having the energy to do in a day.

In contrast, this is the Easter season in our church calendar, a time when we celebrate new life and resurrection joy. The challenge is how to put these two things together. With rising case numbers, the new risks associated with variants and increasing restrictions, it is hard to feel optimistic even as more people are vaccinated and we are being told the end is in sight.

These two opposing energies – optimism and joy on the one hand and fear and pessimism on the other hand - are what we see in today's scripture. This story, often known as the story of Doubting Thomas, is an acknowledgement of our humanness. Doubt will happen, grief will happen. We are emotional creatures. This story is a metaphor for our own journey, as we yearn to find new life behind the closed doors we are living with through this pandemic.

The scene opens on Easter evening. Good Friday has come and gone. Easter morning has come and gone. Mary has told the disciples her amazing story of discovering Jesus alive instead of dead in the tomb as she expected. Where do we find the disciples? Not dancing in the streets! No, we find them huddled in fear behind locked doors, worried about their safety and wondering what to do now that Jesus, their hope, their identity and their inspiration is gone. They clearly didn't believe Mary's story in their hearts even if they nodded and told her they believed it. They had not made the shift to joy, that's for sure!

They are locked away in fear. They are definitely not an Easter people proclaiming Christ is risen. Imagine them. No energy. No appetite. No initiative. They are simply done in. The past week was just too much. Sound familiar?

Then Jesus appears, right in the middle of the room. He greets them saying, "Peace." just like he greeted the disciples so many times before. Imagine the scene now. Imagine the energy shift in the room. Imagine the disbelief. Maybe they were glancing furtively at one another, checking to see if anyone else could see Jesus. Surely two miraculous appearances, one to Mary in the morning and one now, would be enough to get them through their fear and grief – to move them into resurrection joy. Or maybe not ...

The story continues and the next week finds the disciples still in the same room behind closed doors. They haven't moved an inch. They are still grieving and huddled in fear. And now Thomas, who was not with them the week before, is with them. Thomas has heard the story of Jesus' amazing resurrection twice, once from Mary and once from the rest of the disciples. However, Thomas isn't buying the story and in fact, the rest of the disciples are not acting any differently from the week before, so while their mouths may be saying they believe, their hearts have not shifted. They are still paralyzed.

Into this space Jesus appears once more. He offers to show Thomas his wounds but Thomas, now that he actually sees Jesus, doesn't need to see them. Jesus' presence is enough. Thomas responds saying, "My Master and my God!" In that moment, Thomas knows that Jesus is really alive. That however isn't the end of the story. The scripture tells us that even these three visits by the risen Christ were not enough. Jesus appeared more times than could be told of in the gospels before the disciples were strong enough to carry on without that reassurance his appearances brought.

How does this story help us as we struggle with pandemic fatigue? What wisdom is there in this story for each one of us who is feeling sad, anxious and frustrated and having a hard time finding resurrection joy in this season of Easter?

One thing that comes to mind is the reassurance that it is perfectly normal to be feeling this way. We see in scripture that recovery from trauma takes time. The disciples' grief and fear were not overcome by one miraculous appearance of Christ in their midst. It took so many that the gospel writers couldn't include them all. It is normal to feel the way we are feeling. Not pleasant but normal. Let's not beat ourselves up.

In the zoom call I mentioned with Rev. David Robertson, he taught that emotions work something like a sine wave. For those with a mathematical bent, you will know what this is. For those of us who are not, a sine wave is a mathematical curve that describes a smooth periodic oscillation. A sine wave moves forward, rising and falling in a continuous predictable flow. His point is that emotions, just like a sine wave, flow through ups and downs. We can't go against the natural flow. A sine wave cannot reverse its direction. In order to rise through the upward curve, it must go through the downward curve. In order to get to joy, we must move through grief. When we try to ignore or deny the grief, we are fighting against the natural flow, trying to paddle against the white water of our tears. This results in our being stuck and not moving at all. It blocks our capacity for resilience.

This pandemic has left us with plenty of things to grieve; loss of life, loss of a way of being, loss of safety, loss of physical connection. On top of that are frustration, anxiety, fear, anger. It is no wonder that it is hard to joyfully live into the hope of vaccines getting us back to hugging our friends and family. We have been traumatized by Covid 19. These challenging feelings are normal. Not comfortable but normal. And the only way to get to joy is to acknowledge and accept the emotions that come with this traumatization.

Our culture teaches us that it is weak to cry but, in fact, tears are healing. Tears are the pressure release valve. This doesn't have to mean crying uncontrollably. It can simply be taking a few moments to scan your emotions and acknowledge that you are feeling sad or anxious or angry or whatever that feeling might be. Be gentle with yourself – acknowledge you are human and that all your emotions are valid. It is ok. Don't let the messages in our culture that say we need to be positive all the time fool you. The natural pattern of our emotional journey is to let down and then to bounce back. Go with the flow.

I think that is why Christ kept appearing. The disciples needed time to process their grief and fear before they could embrace resurrection joy. The good news is that Christ kept coming back and eventually the disciples did have the energy and the faith they needed to build the early church. Jesus keeps coming to us in our grief and fear too. Through all our troubles, Christ is holding us with compassion and love. When we let ourselves be ok with the emotions we are feeling, the door of our own locked room opens and we can see the little signs of new life that are around us. We unblock the natural flow of our emotions to allow new life to enter in. It won't be immediate but gradually we will get ourselves unstuck and a bounce back begins.

What does that mean in a practical sense? What can we do to handle our more challenging emotions in a healthy way? Here is one possibility.

Start with a prayer of grief. This is simply acknowledging the sadness or whatever emotion it is that you've been busy trying to ignore. Accept it. Be kind and gentle with yourself. Acknowledge that grief has settled on you and build a relationship with it. Simply take a few minutes to sit with your emotions and receive them as normal and real. There doesn't have to be any words or organized thoughts. Just be with whatever you are feeling. That is prayer in and of itself.

The second piece is a prayer of thanks. Once you've discovered and acknowledged what you are feeling and let yourself be ok with that, take a moment to look back over the day and see if there was a good moment. Sometimes we get so lost and overwhelmed in the grief or anxiety that we forget how we enjoyed our toast in the morning or how the robin we saw lifted our spirits. Were there little gifts in the day to say thanks for? Notice the good things and celebrate the wins.

The last piece is a prayer of hope. This is an action prayer. Think of one small thing you can do to feel a bit better and then do it. Are you dehydrated? – drink a glass of water. Is there a message from someone that lifted your spirits that you can reread? Would it help to get outside for a few minutes? Perhaps you can spend some time with deep breathing – breathe in peace, breathe out calm. What is a small thing you can do to open the door for hope to enter? Taking a small step moves us along our journey and helps us become unstuck.

Using these prayers to engage with our emotions reminds me a bit of being in the car, stuck in the snow. There is that moment when we hear the spinning wheels and the temptation is to press the gas pedal harder. That doesn't work. Similarly, fighting against our emotions doesn't help, it gets us more stuck. What works is tiny rocking motions – backward and forward, until we finally are moving again.

These three prayers are the rocking motion. Prayer of grief, prayer of thanks, prayer of hope – rocking back and forth. Also remember that sometimes when we are stuck, we need a push to get us over the last hump. Remember that if your grief or anxiety or anger is too overwhelming to cope with, call for help.

The journey of faith can be bumpy and we are experiencing a pretty rough ride just now. Just like the disciples after Jesus was crucified, we are too are locked behind the closed doors of grief and fear brought by the pandemic. Remember that we are never alone. Just like Christ appeared to the disciples over and over again, he is with us.

This is as true when we can't for the life of us feel Christ with us as when Christ's presence is so bright it is like a shining beacon beckoning us on. Doubt doesn't change that. Grief doesn't change that. Anger doesn't change that. Christ is with us, we are not alone, even when we feel like every day is Good Friday. Just like spring follows winter, little shoots of new life will sprout within us, bringing hope and joy. Easter joy will come like the sunrise comes each morning. Thanks be to God.