

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Second Sunday of Easter • April 19, 2020

Acts 2:14a, 22-32 • Psalm 16 • 1 Peter 1:3-9 • John 20:19-31

The Covid-19 pandemic has made us reflect on what some of the words we throw around every day actually mean. Take, for example, the word “essential.” We talk lots now about “essential” workers and “essential” industries. We have a sign up in front of the church that thanks our essential service workers, the people who work in hospitals, grocery stores, pharmacies, sanitation work, in short, the people who ensure society can continue functioning even when most things shut down. But even a word like “essential” is hard to define. Are golf courses essential? Depends where you live. Just like liquor stores, playgrounds, and construction sites.

And we’ve probably had some version of that conversation in our heads, too. What is really essential for me? What are the things that are non-negotiable? What are the things that I really need? And what are the things that I can live without? What are the things that I can’t have or experience because they would be too risky? The latter category has certainly gotten bigger over the past month.

Another word, one that I want to think a little bit more about today, is “normal.” A line I’ve heard again and again, one that I’ve probably even said, is, “I just want things to go back to normal.” Just the other day one of the companies we buy liturgical paraphernalia from advertised a “Back to Normal Sale.”

By normal, we usually mean the way things were back in say, January. In terms of what we do here at the church, that means that I want to be able to shake someone’s hand. I want to be able to meet Love Fund clients in person. I want to be able to say the Apostles’ Creed without trying to figure out who is on mute. Maybe you can come up with some examples from your own life. I want to go grocery shopping without worrying I’m too close to someone. I want to be able to visit my family member in the nursing home again. I want to get back to work.

And we’ve certainly seen some of that impulse over the past week as we’ve begun to talk about what happens after the pandemic in the months and years ahead. And it’s revealing how much of that discourse has been centered around phrases like “opening back up” and “getting back to normal.”

Which seems to be setting us up for disappointment. Because the truth is there is no normal to go back to. The way we operated before this pandemic is over. Most obvious, it won’t go back to normal for the people who have died because of the virus. But even those of us who have not been infected have still borne some cost through layoffs and restructurings, stresses and anxieties of new roles of caring, even just giving up plans that we’d had for our lives. To take a somewhat silly example, church will look very different when we get back together. We likely won’t pass offering plates for a while. We certainly won’t commune by intinction. We probably won’t be able to serve coffee hour treats that people baked at home. Whenever we are able to gather again, however many weeks, months, years away that is, it won’t feel “normal.”

It’s important to get ready for that because we often struggle to talk about death. Not just death as physical death but death as loss. Because while most of our discourse focuses on an economy with pent-up demand and a workforce ready to get back to normal, there will also be a tremendous amount of grief in the months and years to come. We often act as if we can go through life and pretend everything is the same, that we can just come out and go back to normal. Stay strong and open back up. But the truth is we really can’t.

Today’s gospel reading, a famous one about Thomas’s encounter with the risen Christ, is a fitting story to think about this experience of grief and resurrection. Much has been made about Thomas and how Thomas gets a bad rap in the story, which is true. But there’s something else that’s

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important to focus on. The risen Christ still has wounds. In other words, the risen Christ still bears the marks of the crucifixion. The risen Christ who appears to the disciples in their locked room is the same one who was crucified on the cross. As John Updike put it, “The same hinged thumbs and toes / The same valved heart / That—pierced—died, withered, paused, and then regathered / Out of enduring Might / New strength to enclose.”

This is so obvious when you read the story it's easy to pass over how significant it is. The resurrection does not mean that Jesus has not died. The resurrection does not mean that Jesus has not suffered. The resurrection does not mean that Jesus is perfectly healed. Perhaps most important, the risen Christ does not get the gang back together and head back out to Galilee to perform some more miracles like they did before the Holy Week debacle. In other words, resurrection does not mean that things are going back to normal.

No, resurrection is about going through death and finding life on the other side of it. It isn't to say that death doesn't haunt us or cause us to grieve. It is, to use St. John's phrase, not to say that the darkness does not exist. Only that it can't overcome the light.

Every year at synod assembly, our bishop Tracie gives a report which is really more of a pep talk. And at the end she'll usually say something to the effect of, “We, the people of the church, are a resurrection people.” For the remaining forty-odd days of Easter, that might be an enlightening image for us to focus on. What does it mean for us to be a people who proclaim the resurrection in the midst of death?

St. John's story of the wounded Christ coming to meet the disciples offers one hint at what it means for us to live into our identity as resurrection people. Which is that to be a resurrection people doesn't mean that we're optimists or that we're looking on the bright side or that we'll get through this if we stay #WyckoffStrong. It means that we are a people who speak openly and honestly about death in all of its forms, who encourage one another to grieve, to acknowledge loss. But it also means that we are a people who hold out a promise of transformation, resurrection, and eternal life even in the midst of that death.

Whenever we come out of this, things won't go back to the way things were. There is no normal to go back to. We will come out of with wounds. Some of us with more than others. But like Christ, the wounds we bear are no longer simply remnants of death, but marks of resurrection. Signs that God is capable of bringing life out of death. The risen Christ is not here to make our problems go away or make things go back to the way they were. But the wounded healer who gives us the new strength to enclose.

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