

“Signs of (Easter) Life”
Easter 2C (April 28, 2019)
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>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put our hand on someone’s shoulder and let it matter. Amen.<<

The story about two old rabbis arguing over a passage in the Bible is well-known in Jewish and Christian traditions.¹ There are many versions of the story, including one in the Jewish Talmud. One modern version of the story tells of two rabbis sitting on a park bench engaged in a heated debate. The conversation revolves around a particularly complex and obscure verse in the law of Moses - one of the first five books of the Bible. This was not the first time that these two intellectual giants crossed swords over this verse. In fact, they’d been debating it for years, sometimes changing their opinions but never finding a consensus. God was, of course, known to have the patience of a saint; but even God had begun to grow tired of the endless bickering. So, finally, one day God decided to visit the two men and tell them once and for all what the verse in question meant. God reached down, pulled the clouds apart, and began to speak: “You have been debating this verse endlessly for years,” said God with a sigh. “Let me just tell you what it means and end the argument.” But before God could continue, the two rabbis looked up and said, in a rare moment of unity, “Who are you to tell us what the verse means? Moses gave us these words, now leave us in peace to continue wrestling with them.”

The point of the story, says one commentator, is that wrestling with texts and stories in the Bible is sometimes more important than settling on a single, definitive meaning - wrestling with, arguing over, struggling with, *even* disagreeing with texts and stories in the Bible can actually be signs that one is taking it seriously - so seriously, in fact, that the Bible becomes a place to *start* a conversation, as we say in the UCC, not a knockout blow to end conversation.

During the season of Lent this year, we studied a book by Rachel Held Evans titled *Inspired* - it’s a book about the Bible.² A recurring theme in the book is the Bible’s diversity. “Bible stories don’t have to mean just one thing,” she writes, “the biblical text invites us to consider the possibilities.”³ The Bible is “a diverse library of ancient texts,” she writes.⁴ “There are parts of [it] that inspire,” she says, and “parts that perplex.”⁵ A library of texts. No single meaning. A place to start conversation. An invitation to consider possibilities. Inspired, inspiring, perplexing.

All of these phrases could be applied to the stories in the New Testament gospels of what happened after Easter. The many stories that speak of the appearance of the resurrected Jesus form a library without a single meaning; they start a conversation that has lasted some 2,000 years; stories that invite us to consider the possibilities of what Easter might mean; stories that inspire and perplex. Take the Gospel of Mark, for instance, with what is probably the most perplexing story of Easter in the New Testament gospels. Mark’s gospel ends on the edge of a cliff. The women who first peered into the empty tomb, according to the earliest

¹ This version is recounted in Peter Rollins, *The Fidelity of Betrayal: Towards a Church Beyond Belief* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2008), 155-156.

² Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2018).

³ Held Evans, *Inspired*, 40.

⁴ Held Evans, *Inspired*, 102.

⁵ Held Evans, *Inspired*, 79.

manuscripts of Mark, “said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.” The gospel ends on a cliffhanger, which has made centuries of readers wonder: if the first witnesses didn’t say anything, how did news of the resurrection get out? Early copyists of Mark’s gospel added endings to ease the tension: some later copies of the gospel speak of the women eventually announcing the resurrection; other copies speak of the resurrected Jesus appearing to the disciples at a later time; and some scholars have argued that the original ending of Mark’s gospel was lost. Yes, Mark’s gospel is a cliffhanger, almost begging the reader to finish the Easter story - to carry on the conversation and give Easter its meaning.

But the post-Easter stories in the other gospels - this post-resurrection library in the New Testament without a single meaning that starts a conversation and invites us to consider the possibilities of what Easter might mean - are also perplexing. Luke’s post-Easter stories speak of the resurrected Jesus eating with two disciples and then vanishing without a trace. Luke speaks of Jesus appearing to the other disciples, who are terrified thinking he’s a ghost until they touch his - what seems to be - material body. And Luke speaks of the post-Easter Jesus, who appears and disappears yet has a kind of material body, eating a piece of broiled fish just because he can. It’s a resurrected body that St. Paul would describe in his letters as a “spirit-body.” Matthew’s post-Easter stories are equally perplexing. In Matthew’s story, the women fled the empty tomb to announce the resurrection, and on the way, Jesus surprises them by appearing out of nowhere, saying, “Greetings!” And later, even when post-Easter Jesus appeared to the disciples, Matthew says that some of them still “doubted.” But it’s in John’s gospel that I think we find the most intriguing post-Easter stories. John’s resurrected Jesus gets mistaken for a gardener in one story. And later, John’s resurrected Jesus - in his spirit-body - passes through a locked door to meet the disciples. And only in John do we find today’s gospel reading about Doubting Thomas. Thomas, the disciple who wasn’t present when Jesus passed through the locked door, and who refused to believe the testimony of his fellow disciples until he saw and touched the resurrected Jesus for himself - a scene depicted so beautifully in that Caravaggio painting where Thomas is inches from Jesus’ body, examining every detail; and Jesus himself is holding Thomas’ arm, guiding it toward the wound in his side.

The story of Doubting Thomas is one of the few stories that appears every year on that three-year cycle of scripture readings called “the lectionary.” Each year on the Sunday after Easter, the lectionary gospel reading is the story of Doubting Thomas. It’s a reminder that doubt and mystery and uncertainty haunt the life of faith. “The gospels vary quite a bit in their accounts of Jesus’ resurrection,” writes Christian Wiman, “[and they vary in] the ensuing encounters he had with people,” he goes on, “but they are quite consistent about one thing: many of his followers doubted him, sometimes even when he was staring them in the face. This ought to be heartening for those of us who seek belief,” says Wiman. “If the disciples of Christ could doubt not only firsthand accounts of his resurrection but the very fact of his face in front of them, then clearly, doubt ... is in some way [part of] the seed of Christianity itself”⁶ According to the story, as John’s gospel tells it, once Thomas has seen and touched, and once he’s heard the voice of Jesus and the words of Jesus - words that are poorly rendered in our pew Bibles, but when translated literally from John’s Greek say, “be not unbelieving but believing” - once he’s seen and touched and heard these words, Thomas, writes John, believes and exclaims, “my lord and my God.” This is the climactic scene in John’s gospel. It is the last in a series of signs that are intended to awaken faith in

⁶ Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 76.

John's readers - signs that begin with Jesus turning water into wine; signs that include the healing of the blind man, the raising of Lazarus from the dead, the multiplication of loaves and fishes; and signs that climax with the resurrection and the exclamation of faith by the *once* doubting Thomas - a climactic sign, a tactile sign (touching and seeing and hearing), a textured sign with layers of meaning that run deeper than simply the surface story about a doubter becoming a believer. This story is a moment of encounter with resurrection itself. Thomas believes because he has met and experienced resurrection. He touched it; he heard it. He saw its healed scars.

Maybe this is what continues to make Christianity so compelling to so many. It's what keeps followers of Christ drinking in faith at this 2,000 year old fountain. A faith that is fleshy and bloody. A faith that affirms the scars of life's daily grittiness, its daily battles in flesh and blood, its daily crosses and crucifixions; it affirms a God who got down in the trenches of life where real people get bruised and battered and feel pain, get addicted and get sick, experience loss and depression and shame. It's an incarnated faith - a faith of flesh and blood crosses and a faith of empty tombs, which teaches us to look for "the forms that grace takes in our everyday lives," as Christian Wiman puts it - look for signs of resurrection, signs of new life, signs of Easter, to touch them and feel them and listen for them - to experience resurrection, as Doubting-Believing Thomas did so long ago.

To look for signs of resurrection. To look for them amid life's crosses. Crosses like yesterday's synagogue shooting near San Diego on the last day of Passover. Crosses like last week's bombings in Sri Lankan churches where Cardinal Malcom Ranjith has presided over countless funerals, offering the wounded hands, feet, and side of the resurrected Christ to shattered families. "I [just try] to be with [the surviving family members]," said Cardinal Ranjith in a recent interview.⁷ "I [try] to console them . . . I [try] to be a person who gives them strength." he said. And he admitted with tears how difficult it is to offer hope to children whose parents died in the bombings. Yes, there are crosses. There are hands and feet and sides pierced by bombings and shootings and hate. There are crosses; but there are also resurrections.

Crosses and resurrections - as in the story told by Palestinian Yousef Bashir.⁸ "I was born and raised in the Gaza Strip," wrote Bashir in Friday's *New York Times*. "For years, my 'neighbors' were Israeli soldiers based in [a] settlement across the road from my house. Although the settlement was illegally established, my father taught me never to feel hostility toward the soldiers. They were the children of Abraham, as were we Palestinians. But in September 2000, when I was 11 years old, all that changed. One night after dinner, the soldiers started shooting at our kitchen windows. As we crawled to the center of the house, I could see the bullets ricocheting around me. Soon after, the soldiers told my father that it was time for him to leave. They wanted to use our house as a command center. My father politely but firmly refused: 'I am a peaceful man,' [he said,] 'I am not your enemy. There is no need for me to leave.' . . . [T]he soldiers . . . took over the second and third floors, and the rooftop [of our house]. My family - my grandmother, my parents, and eight of us children - were no longer allowed to go upstairs or into our backyard. . . . This lasted for years. My house was no longer my home. It was a base for the Israeli army, and I was filled with resentment. And yet, my father continued to live as though nothing had changed. . . .

⁷ <https://cruxnow.com/church-in-asia/2019/04/26/sri-lankan-cardinals-focus-isnt-rebuilding-churches-but-lives/>

⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/26/opinion/sunday/israel-gaza-peace.html>

Determined to treat everyone politely, he referred to the soldiers as ‘our guests.’ ... The soldiers tried everything to get my father to leave,” writes Bahir. “One smashed his head against the wall; others shot up his bedroom; they bulldozed the fields where he grew dates and olives and demolished the greenhouses where he planted tomatoes and eggplants; they shot his donkey, and set fire to the shed where he kept ducks and chickens. ... Then, on Feb. 18, 2004, a soldier shot me in the back. It happened in front of my father and three United Nations officers who had come to investigate our situation. ... I was 15. For the first time I saw tears in my father’s eyes. ... In bed at the hospital in Gaza, barely able to open my eyes, I realized I could not move my legs. I overheard the nurses wondering whether I would ever walk again. Then a miracle occurred. After three days, arrangements were made to transfer me to a hospital in Tel Aviv. Normally Palestinians like me were not allowed into Israel For the next several weeks, my father stayed at my side. He talked to me about family, country, his dreams and his understanding of life. He told me I was going to make him proud. Over and over he said: ‘Your life has been spared. A new door has just opened for you.’ ... Being in Israel was a challenge for me,” writes Bashir. “For years, I had lived in fear of Israeli soldiers. Now I was surrounded by Israeli doctors, and yet they were doing all they could to save my life. My favorite nurse was Seema, a Jewish woman from Iraq who fed me, cleaned me, gave me my medicine and, most important, made me smile. An Israeli soldier had tried to kill me, but now Israelis were trying to heal me. ... I was sent to a physical therapy clinic. ... It took almost a year, but I learned to walk again. Finally I was able to return home to Gaza. ... A few months later, in August 2005, Israel unilaterally withdrew from the strip, and from my home. The soldiers had occupied that house for five years. Now my father was once again able to live freely on his ancestral land. His spirit had prevailed. He had proved to me that violence is not the only option when standing up for freedom and dignity. He had taught me that seeking peace is not only a prayer, but also an obligation. I have since moved to the United States, where I have spoken to many groups about my experience. People need to know that good men and women like my parents do exist in places that are full of war and hatred. They may speak more quietly than some, but they deserve to be heard. ...” Bashir concludes: “The Israeli army apologized to me, and the soldier who shot me was suspended. I often wonder what has happened to him since, why he did it and what he now thinks about the whole thing. I wish we could talk. I would tell him that I want to do my part to make peace between our peoples more possible, the way my father taught me. I would tell him that I have forgiven him.”

...Perhaps this is yet another post-Easter story - a story of crucifixion scars and resurrection life. A story, like the post-Easter stories in the gospels, that asks us to consider: Where else in our lives - in our daily lives, in the life of our country and world - do we see stories of reconciliation and healing and the flowering of peace? Where do we see and touch scars that have been transformed into new life? Such signs might be signs of the spirit of the resurrected Christ on the loose in the world. Amen.