

“Thomas and the Parallactic Resurrection”  
 Easter 2A (April 19, 2020) - **COVID-19 (Sunday 6)**  
 Scripture: Psalm 16; John 20:19-31  
 Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>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.<<

There's an old Jewish tale about a rabbi and an eager young man.<sup>1</sup> “The story goes that after a prolonged search, the young man finally [found] a suitable rabbi, and ask[ed] if the rabbi would be willing to tutor him. But upon seeing his youth the rabbi simply smil[ed] and [said], ‘You are too young and have too little life experience for the lessons that I have to teach. Come back to me in ten years.’ But the young man [was] full of a confidence that border[ed] on arrogance and so respond[ed], ‘I may be young but I have already mastered Aristotelian logic and symbolic logic. Test me,’” he said. “‘Ask me any question you want and I will prove to you that I am ready.’ The rabbi [thought] for a few moments and then [chose] a question: ‘Two men descend a chimney,’” said the rabbi. “‘When they get to the bottom, one man's face is covered in soot. Tell me, which one washes his face?’ In response the young man immediately [said], ‘Why, that is easy. It would be the one with the soot on his face.’ In response the rabbi turn[ed] to leave, saying, ‘Of course not. What are you thinking? It is the man without the soot who washes his face, for he sees his friend's complexion and thinks that he too must be dirty.’ ‘Please don't send me away,’ replie[d] the young man. ‘Test me again. Any question at all.’ And so the rabbi [thought] for a moment and then [said], ‘OK, listen carefully this time. Two men descend a chimney. When they get to the bottom, one man's face is covered in soot. Tell me, which one washes his face?’ ‘Why, the [one] without the soot on his face,’ replie[d] the young man. Again the rabbi [shook] his head, ‘You are not listening in the right way,’” he said. “‘It is obvious that it is the man with the soot on his face who washes. He sees the reaction of his friend upon reaching the ground, can taste the soot from his lips, and can feel it stinging his eyes. Now leave me in peace,’” said the rabbi ... . ‘Please,’ replie[d] the young man, ‘test me one last time, as I think I have it now.’ ‘[OK,] one last time,’ [said] the rabbi. ‘This time I want you to really listen. Two men descend a chimney. When they get to the bottom, one man's face is covered in soot. Tell me, which one washes his face?’ ‘The first answer I gave,’ shout[ed] the young man, [it was the man with the dirty face who washed,] ‘but [he did it] for different reasons.’ ‘No, no, no,’ [said] the rabbi as he [got up to leave]. ‘They both wash their faces. How could someone descend a chimney and not think that their face would be covered in soot?’”

This old Jewish tale is recounted by Peter Rollins in his book *The Fidelity of Betrayal*. The creative Rollins, as we saw in last week's sermon, is fond of twisted tales and paradoxical parables and stories that leave you scratching your head. Jesus himself often taught using stories and parables that confused listeners. These kinds of stories, says Rollins, provide readers and listeners with what he calls a “parallactic view.” Parallax, he says, “refers to the apparent shift of an object against its background due to a shift in the viewer's position.” In the field of astronomy, a parallactic view helps to measure the distance of stars outside our solar system. But in the fields of philosophy and theology, says Rollins, a parallactic view is

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<sup>1</sup> The story is recounted in Peter Rollins, *The Fidelity of Betrayal: Towards a Church Beyond Belief* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2008), 60-61.

more radical; it refers to a shift in perspective that makes something look *completely different* when viewed from a different vantage point.

From one vantage point, the past few weeks reveal heart-warming and inspiring acts of human solidarity - opera singers and violinists on balconies, city-wide cheers for healthcare workers, parents working with school districts to teach kids from home; and yesterday's eight hour worldwide stay-at-home concert organized by Lady Gaga called "One World Together At Home" was so beautiful to watch that it was like a spiritual experience. It was worth it just to hear John Legend's golden voice sing the song *Bigger Love* with lyrics that speak of the world "feel[ing] like it's crumbling. Everyday, another new something. But in the end," sang Legend, "in the end, can't nobody do us in. ... 'Cause we got a bigger love." From one vantage point, the past few weeks have been inspiring.

But last week *New York Times* columnist David Brooks published a collection of letters from readers that offered a different vantage point on the current crisis.<sup>2</sup> A parallax view, to refer again to Peter Rollins. "I [recently] asked *Times* readers to describe how the coronavirus is affecting their mental health," writes Brooks. "More than 5,000 [people] wrote in, and I've spent the last week overwhelmed by the bravery and vulnerability of [their] responses ... ." David Brooks went on to quote from a few of those letters. Tamar from Riverdale, NY wrote to Brooks, saying, "My life has suddenly started to feel like it is spiraling out of control ... [a] full-fledged crisis mode is on. I used to rely on predictable outcomes and routine. The uncertainty of what's ahead has become the most frightening thing, triggering fear and anxiety. The world has been brought to its knees by a tiny microorganism. This pandemic has robbed me of my sense of control." Barbara, from Ashland, OR wrote to David Brooks, saying, "The days slip away. Sometimes I feel anxious, often I feel lonely. I miss my husband [who died of cancer last year], [I miss the] physical connection with him and, now, with others [also]. ... ." Lise, from Rye, NY wrote to Brooks, saying, "I am feeling overwhelmed and weepy ... . I'm feeling useless, and that is depressing to me ... . I feel like I'm finally cracking, and I don't even know why." Rose from New Jersey wrote to Brooks, saying, "I am overwhelmed some days with a sense of loss, particularly because I have not seen my grandchildren ... . My husband and I were their primary babysitters when our daughter returned to work in January. We had them with us for 10 hours most days of the week. We got to see them grow and develop almost as intimately as their parents did. Then, in the span of a week, that was all taken away. ... I miss their touch, their smell, their drool, their runny noses. ... I am angry at a force I cannot see, but more than anything, I am sad and aching to squeeze them again, feel their soft skin next to mine. When this nightmare is over, I will hold them so long my arms will ache ... ." Patricia from New Orleans wrote to Brooks, saying, "As a person with anxiety disorder I can only say that I am struggling to cope. Did I remove my gloves properly? Did I disinfect my groceries properly? Did I wash my hands well enough? ... People with anxiety disorders are always expecting the worst, and now that has come to pass. I am always terrified that I have slipped up somehow and will become ill and die." Blaire from Orlando, FL wrote to Brooks, saying, "As a mother of three who has struggled with anxiety and depression before the coronavirus, this current situation has [made things so much worse]. Having to help my children in distance learning and manage things around the house, all while worrying about my aging parents and my husband, who is working on the front line in a hospital, is horrible

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/09/opinion/mental-health-isolation-coronavirus.html>;  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/09/opinion/covid-anxiety.html>

for me psychologically. It's just too much. ... My children have seen me cry and heard me scream more in these past few weeks than they have in their whole lives. I just pray they are young enough to not remember.” Scott from Chestnut Hill, MA wrote to Brooks, saying, “I’m ... a graduate student and I struggle to focus. It’s difficult not to beat myself up on days when I don’t get any work done, especially in a country that romanticizes working oneself to the bone.” And Peter from Beaverton, OR wrote to Brooks, saying, “The threat feels existential. I am young and healthy and therefore less concerned about my physical health than my mental health. ... I remain hopeful that we will come out of this collective nightmare much stronger than we were before. Whether we choose to acknowledge it, we, as a world, are all in this together.”

I don’t think any of us could listen to those stories and not feel the pain. The human toll taken by the past few weeks is nearly impossible to voice. Grandparents and parents, pregnant mothers and small business owners facing the abyss, graduate students feeling unproductive, people out of work and healthcare workers feeling overwhelmed and desperate. From one vantage point, the past few weeks have been inspiring and heart-warming. From another, they’ve been completely devastating.

One way to read today’s story from John’s gospel is as a tale of shifting perspectives. But today’s story offers yet another perspective on our current situation - it deals in the world of meaning, of trying to make sense of it all. After two thousand years of Christian history - a history that has transmuted the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ into liturgies and hymns and prayers and art - I think the past two thousand years of our ancient tradition have ritualized us, inoculated us from feeling the emotion that those first followers of Jesus felt three days after his death. All they knew was that a smattering of his first followers had seen an empty tomb. But they had no perspective, no meaning, no way to make sense of it all. The Jesus who had told strange stories and paradoxical parables, who had performed extraordinary signs and had transformed lives, had been crucified by the Roman state. And his first followers were left to gather in a small room, hidden away behind locked doors to share their collective grief. What were they doing together? Praying? Sharing stories? Maybe they were sitting Shiva - the Jewish tradition of mourning the dead. Whatever they were doing, suddenly, passing through the locked door, Jesus appeared in front of them displaying his nail pierced hands and feet, uttering a phrase that still guides our Sunday peace-passing to this day: “Peace be with you,” he said. Peace. Shalom, in Hebrew. Salaam, in Arabic. Peace. Two times in that first encounter with his grieving and frightened disciples, Jesus greets them in this way: Peace be with you. Peace: like a sea of glass no longer churning and tumultuous. Peace to you, he says. This story is not the only time in John’s gospel when Jesus speaks words of peace. Earlier in the gospel, Jesus says to his disciples - in words we often speak at memorial services - “Peace I leave you. My peace I give you. ... Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” Peace. Shalom. Salaam. When the scene of today’s story shifts, like a changing scene in a Shakespearean play - when the scene shifts to focus on Thomas a week later, the one disciple who missed seeing the resurrected Jesus on that first Easter evening, Jesus again appears - materializing before them in some mysterious spirit-body form despite the locked and shut doors - when Jesus appears again, he greets his followers with the same words: Peace be with you. And then he again displays his nail pierced hands and feet, his spear-pierced side, so Thomas, the Doubter among them, can see and touch and experience, what the band The Hold Steady calls, “How a Resurrection Feels.” This story in John’s gospel is parallaxic -

different vantage points: from grief and uncertainty to wonder and belief, to the next question of meaning. What does it mean to say that Christ has risen? What does it mean to say that the tomb was empty? What does it mean to say that Christ can appear when people are heartbroken and grieving and maxed out; what does it mean to say that the risen Christ can appear when grandparents are suffering the loss of hugging their grandchildren and expectant mothers are at the end of their ropes; what does it mean to say Christ is risen when small businesses are on the line and people are out of work and parents are struggling to keep their children connected to a semblance of school? What does the phrase Christ has risen mean to us who are living through something unprecedented?

One aspect of this ancient story that I take solace in is the fact that Jesus even shows up at all. He appears to his grieving disciples. He appears, personally, to the Doubting Thomas. He shows up. He shows up in ways they never could have anticipated or expected. He shows up with “peace” - with shalom, with salaam - on his lips. He shows up, and he shows *them* what it means to live in an Easter world. A parallax view. A view from a different vantage point. A perspective, as contemplative theologian Richard Rohr, in his book *The Universal Christ* - a book that Bono, singer in the band U2 said he could not put down - a perspective that Richard Rohr says, sees “the divine” in “everything” and “everyone.”<sup>3</sup> “God’s presence,” says Rohr, “can be seen in the ordinary and the material.” “Christ in everything and everyone,” he says, means that the crucified and resurrected Christ appears in every human body, in every human face, in every bit of creation. Appearing so we can see differently, be more compassionate with ourselves and with others, and spread that divine peace, that divine shalom, that divine salaam.

In his book *The Universal Christ*, Richard Rohr tells a story about an experience that Caryl Houselander had while riding a London subway. I shared a portion of this story with you on Ash Wednesday, but I want to share the whole story with you now.<sup>4</sup> “I was in an underground train,” says Houselander, “a crowded train in which all sorts of people jostled together, sitting and strap-hanging - workers of every description going home at the end of the day. Quite suddenly I saw with my mind, but as vividly as a wonderful picture, [I saw] Christ in them all. But I saw more than that; not only was Christ in every one of them, living in them, dying in them, rejoicing in them, sorrowing in them - but because [Christ] was in them, and because they were here, the whole world was here too, here in this underground train; not only the world as it was at that moment, not only all the people in all the countries of the world, but all those people who had lived in the past, and all those yet to come. I came out into the street and walked for a long time in the crowds. It was the same here, on every side, in every passer-by, everywhere - Christ. I had long been haunted,” she says, “by the [medieval] conception of the humiliated Christ, the [hurting] Christ limping [along], begging his bread; the Christ who, all through the ages, might return to the earth and come even to sinners to win their compassion by his need. Now, in the flash of a second, I knew that this dream is a fact; not a dream, not the fantasy or legend of devout people, not the prerogative of [medieval imagination], but Christ in [humanity] ... Christ in the tomb,” she says, “is potentially the risen Christ [in every single person].”

Christ in every person. *Every* person, from world leaders to hourly workers, from the unemployed to those who can work from home; parents and grandparents, teachers and

<sup>3</sup> Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope for, and Believe* (London: SPCK, 2019), 18, 30, 33.

<sup>4</sup> Rohr, *The Universal Christ*, 2-3.

doctors and nurses; students learning from home; balcony singers and intubated patients. Christ in everyone, as David Brooks highlights in the letters he received from readers around the country - Christ in the Tamars and the Barbaras, the Lises and the Roses, the Patricias and the Blaires, the Scotts and the Peters. The crucified and risen Christ in everyone, every single person. A crucified and risen Christ who shows up in unexpected ways and speaks the words of peace, of shalom, of salaam. A crucified and risen Christ who opens to us new ways of showing compassion to ourselves and to our fellow, grieving and hurting and inspiring neighbors. Amen.