

Sermon for April 3, 2016 – “God Knows”

Second Sunday of Easter, Year C – Text: John 20:19-31

In only a few years in ministry, I’ve seen enough death to last a lifetime. I’ve have watched people, from the very young, to the very old, die. Quite often it makes no sense and there are no answers to the questions people often ask. One particular experience came to mind as I was preparing this sermon. It happened toward the end of my chaplaincy at Hershey Medical Center. Nothing about that young woman’s death made sense. One day she was a normal and healthy, the next, she was in the hospital with a brain injury suffered in an automobile accident. As the chaplain on duty that day, I’d been called in by the doctor. He wanted someone from the spiritual care department there when he broke the bad news about the woman’s condition to the family. Though he was known to be a man of faith, this one was harder than most, he’d said. The woman was a newlywed, she and her husband had been married only six months before. The accident happened without warning, said her niece who was in the car with her and walked away from the accident unscathed. One day life was the way it was supposed to be, the next, it turned completely upside down. The doctor told the family that there was no brain activity and that they now had a decision to make. They had to decide whether or not to keep her on life support. About a half hour after they removed all the tubes and apparatus, the young woman died. Suddenly on a hot July afternoon we all found ourselves gathered in fear and disbelief behind the closed door of the family waiting room. And even though it’d gotten rather stuffy, no one went to open the door. It was almost like we all thought if we could keep the door shut and stay huddled in there together then the reality of death could be avoided for a while longer. How long this tactic of avoidance could work no one could say. But we were going to try it for as long as we could.

And as we sat there, gathered behind the shut door in our fear and disbelief, everyone was silent. No one knew what to say. There was nothing **to** say, no platitude seemed appropriate. No one said “it was her time.” No one said “God needed another angel.” No one said “it must be God’s will.” No one said a word, and do you know why? Because it wasn’t her time. God didn’t need her as an angel. And the God in whom I trust would never will something like this. I sat there with the family in silence because there was nothing I could say to comfort them. Her death made no sense. We had no words. And at some point, her husband simply cried softly, “My God, why? This hurts.” I wanted to get up to stand with him, put my hands on his shoulders. But I couldn’t even do that. I wanted desperately to say something to him, something to help ease his pain. But, what do you say? Do you say “I know”? Could I really say “I know how it hurts”? No, I couldn’t. I had no idea what that felt like. I’d leave the hospital that day to go home to my wife of (then) 19 years. I had no idea the pain the husband was feeling. I just knew he was living my worst nightmare.

But the thing is, in a way, I wanted to know. I wanted to know that kind of hurt so that I could really stand with them in that space of brokenness and sharp pain and unrelenting grief. I was studying to be a pastor and this is what pastor’s do, right? I was there and, strange as it sounds, I wanted to know. But I couldn’t. And pretending I could would’ve only caused more pain. One pastor puts it this way: “It is a conundrum, I think.” “When we pour out a painful story, a testimony of truth and torment, we don’t want someone to say, ‘I know. I know exactly what that feels like.’ “Because it’s my hurt, my story. “Unique”. “Singular” “No one else can really know what it feels like”. “Maybe you know what it feels like to lose a spouse, but you don’t know what it feels like to lose **my** spouse”.

“Maybe you know what it feels like to look for a job, but you don’t know what it means for me, for my family, for my finances, for my ego”. “Maybe you know about cancer...but you don’t know **my** cancer”. “**My** weariness and worry”. “You don’t know **my** [pain], **my** headaches”. “You. Don’t. Know.”

But at the same time, the conundrum, the mystery, the challenge, comes because whenever we’re **in** that place of brokenness and sharp pain and unrelenting grief, we desperately **want** someone to know. Don’t we? Don’t we **want** someone to put their arm around us and say, “I know?” And why is that? Because if we were the only person experiencing that kind of broken-heartedness it would be too much to bear. We need someone to know. We need someone to say “I **have** had that same feeling”. “I **have** been in that same space of numb shock”. “I **have** locked myself behind closed doors in fear and disbelief, trying to avoid the reality of the pain”. “I **know** what it is to hurt like that.” Why? Why do we need that? Because that hurt would give them the credentials to listen. And we wouldn’t feel so alone.

I think that’s part of what was going on with the disciples in this morning’s gospel reading – including Thomas. They, in their grief and disbelief and fear, were behind locked doors as that first Easter day started to turn to dusk. The air in the upper room might have been stuffy and hot. I doubt they were talking about very much. They had no words. How do you speak of such disappointment? How do you speak of such grief and heartache? Not only had their friend been killed there in public, in disgrace, in humiliation but He’d also been who they thought was The One. He was supposed to have been the Messiah. He was supposed to have been the Savior, God’s Son. He was supposed to have been their hope. The fulfillment of God’s promise. The herald of God’s reign. But within the span of one week, all of it had crashed down around them. And they were left in that room full of grief, disbelief and fear, hiding behind locked doors in a last ditch attempt to avoid the reality that it was all over. And, for whatever reason, Thomas decided to leave the room. Maybe he’d needed to get some fresh air. Maybe he just couldn’t stand to be around other people anymore. Maybe he desperately needed some time alone so that he could weep and wail and cry out without everyone watching. So he left. And then, something strange happened. In the middle of what felt like that God-forsaken place, in the middle of the disciples’ broken-ness and sharp pain and unrelenting grief, the risen Jesus came. The risen Jesus stood among them, and wished them peace. And then, he did something for which I’ll be forever grateful. He showed them His wounds. He showed them His hands and His side. And we wonder **why**. We wonder why Jesus thought the disciples needed to see His wounds. After all, they hadn’t asked to see them. But, but, we also wonder why he still had them in the first place. Why? One biblical scholar writes: “Isn’t it curious that God could raise Jesus from the dead but didn’t heal the nail wounds in his hands?” “Was this an oversight?” “Surely not.” “The power of death is conquered but the wounds remain...” Why? Why did our risen Christ still bear the marks of His wounds?

I think it was because God knew those wounds would serve as credentials for us. They would be Jesus’ “I know” for us. Because by still bearing the marks of His wounds Jesus showed those first disciples, and us, that the God in whom we trust has taken that woundedness into His very own self. Those wounds testify to us that God literally understands, indeed knows first-hand, what it’s like to be us. The God in whom we trust **literally** understands what it feels like to be born into this world, to be completely and totally vulnerable and dependent on others. The God in whom we trust **literally** understands what it feels like to have to grow up and to take on responsibility, to be an adult with all the stress and pressure that comes with it. The God in whom we trust **literally** understands what it feels like to have your heart broken by betrayal, to be angry when face to face with injustice, or to bask deeply in the warmth of the love of good friends.

And, the God in whom we trust *literally* knows what it feels like to hurt, to suffer, to feel abandoned, to feel completely alone and to die. William Temple said that “the wounds of Christ are his credentials to the suffering race of humanity.” They are our signs that Jesus, God with us, knows. That must be at least some of what the disciples concluded too because as soon as they saw those wounds on their risen Savior, they rejoiced and received His peace. They breathed in His Spirit, making them ready to go and bear witness to the entire world. And later, that’s all Thomas wanted too. For whatever reason, he’d not been with them that day, for that indescribable moment. He’d missed it. But, thank God, Thomas was brave enough to say how he felt out loud. **“Unless I see the mark of the nails in His hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in His side, I will not believe.”** In other words, unless I see his credentials, unless I see that he’s really the same Jesus who was born and who lived, who suffered, who was crucified, who was dead and who was buried...Unless I see those credentials...I will not buy the proposition that God was truly with us. I will not believe that God was truly one of us. Unless I can touch and see that Jesus really knows, then I will not believe that nothing can separate us from God’s love. Because the pain of this world is too great and sometimes wilderness is all that one can see. Thank God Thomas was brave enough to say so.

And then, later, Thomas finds himself standing before the Risen Christ. And in that moment, what does Jesus do? He doesn’t rebuke Thomas. He doesn’t scold or admonish him. He doesn’t shame him. They don’t talk theology. They don’t have a question and answer time. Instead, Jesus the risen Christ shows him the wounds. It’s almost as if Jesus points to His hands and says, “Thomas, I know.” It’s almost as if he points to His side and says, “Thomas, I know.” And Thomas looks at His risen Lord still bearing His wounds, and then **he** knows and he cannot stop himself from making a profession of faith and proclaims: **“My Lord and My God.”**

Thomas looks at Jesus’ wounds, the risen Christ’s credentials, and knows that there will never be a time when his pain or anyone else’s, or that of creation will ever stand alone again. Thomas looks and knows there will never be a time when hurt or grief or powerlessness or pain or death will have the last word again. Because God, in the person of Jesus, knows!

Psychologist Carl Jung used the term “wounded healer” to describe a phenomenon that may take place, in the relationship between analyst and patient. Jung wrote that “it is [one’s] own hurt that gives a measure of [one’s] power to heal.” In 1979, Henri Nouwen wrote the now classic book “The Wounded Healer.” In doing so he placed the concept of the wounded healer squarely in the context of ministry. His thesis is simple: “In our own woundedness we can become a source of life for others.” Central to this, Nouwen believed, was a deep human encounter. An encounter in which one becomes willing to put one’s own faith and doubt, one’s own hope and despair, one’s own light and darkness, at the disposal of others who want to find a way through their confusion and touch the solid core of life in Jesus Christ.

Brothers and sisters, here’s the thing...As people who follow a wounded and risen Christ, as people who generation after generation have been breathed upon, formed by Christ and have been sent to be Christ’s living body in this world, we have work to do. And as you’ve heard me say, we’ve been given the task of bearing one another’s burdens. Certainly, this is no small task. Yet, while we **cannot** claim to fully know the suffering and pain of others we’ve been called (commanded, actually) to stand with them and help them bear it. As people who ourselves have been wounded and found healing in Christ, we are given the means to sit behind those locked doors, in those hot, stuffy rooms, in the middle of broken-ness and pain and unrelenting grief with others.

Not as people with platitudes or easy answers, not necessarily with words at all, but simply as people committed to being there, to being a presence, living, breathing reminders that God is present in those places too. And that despite evidence, or feelings to the contrary, they are not alone and never will be. We, as a congregation, must be willing to be present in tough times and in tough places. We must seek the courage to be there for one another. We, as members of the Body of Christ, must be ready and able to proclaim: “**We** cannot know your hurt, but **God** can. “God **can** and God **does** – God knows!” And God in Christ has the credentials, the wounds, to prove it.

We are not alone...We will never be alone! God knows!

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.