

“What Does Easter Change?”

John 19:5-15; John 20:19-31 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might dare to believe and live
your good news. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

So it's a week later now, and our doors are still locked for fear. Has Easter changed anything? Nobody really thought our quarantine would be over by April 12th, but at this point the only thing that has become clear is how absolutely unknown our immediate future is. Meanwhile, as some are burrowing down, trying to make the best of an unpleasant situation and figure out ways to endure, others are already chafing at restrictions, mostly because we don't like doing what we don't want to do. Death tolls are rising; infections might be peaking, but probably only for the moment. Scams are proliferating, loans to small businesses have dried up, and we still don't have reliable supplies of toilet paper. Has Easter changed anything?

Just last Sunday, some of the disciples – the same ones who didn't take Mary's declaration that she'd “seen the Lord” seriously – were visited by the Risen Christ. They saw his wounded hands and side and received the Holy Spirit he breathed upon them. But Thomas, who missed it, didn't believe them anymore than they had believed Mary. We don't know what else those disciples had done in the intervening week, who they talked to or what sorts of changes they made in their way of living. What we do know is that a week later, the doors were still shut, apparently still locked

for fear. Why should Thomas have believed them when seemingly nothing had changed? It seems Easter takes a while to sink in.

What sort of changes would have made it more believable? Two weeks ago, Tessa spoke to us about misplaced expectations that were placed on Jesus. His disciples had various expectations and hopes, the crowds had expectations and demands, and as we moved through Holy Week, we saw how the religious authorities threw numerous unreasonable expectations, fears, and accusations at Jesus. They spent a lot of energy working to convince Pilate that Jesus was leading a political uprising. “If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor.” I have no doubt that’s what many folks in the crowds and even some of his disciples were hoping for: a revolution overthrowing the Roman occupation that restricted every aspect of their lives and kept them in bondage.

So Easter comes and goes, and the empire is still firmly in control. We are still locked in our houses for fear, earnestly praying that no one will come breathe on us! What does Easter change? How can we experience the same conversion Thomas had? What happened there? How do we go from “unless [fill in the blank with whatever scenario seems unlikely to you], I will not believe” to “My Lord and my God!”? First of all, we need to recognize that we’re dealing with two different understandings of belief here. When Thomas declares he won’t believe unless he gets what he qualifies as incontrovertible proof, he is talking about the sort of belief we

might call “intellectual assent.” What the disciples told him about seeing Jesus made no sense to him: people don’t come back and breathe on their friends after they’ve died. That’s not something he has previously known to be possible, therefore, he needs physical confirmation.

But what happens in that room a week later? Does Thomas place his hands on Jesus’ wounds to ascertain this is, indeed, the same exact body that was hanging on the cross a little while ago? No, he doesn’t. Does he declare, “I have now examined the evidence with my own eyes and hands and deemed it conclusive”? No, he doesn’t. Thomas’ response doesn’t come from his brain, the result of logical analysis. He doesn’t even get as far as doing the research. Rather, he is met by the Risen Christ right exactly where he is; his demands recognized, point by point, not from a need to verify anything, but out of sheer love. The grace offered there, in Jesus seeing and loving Thomas fully, even with his uncertainty, calls forth from him a heart response, “My Lord and my God!” – the most powerful confession of Jesus’ identity in the entire gospel of John. This is belief in the root German word sense: “be-liebe”, “be-love”, to give one’s heart to, belief as a response to grace rather than evidence.

And here we begin to get an answer to the question of what Easter changes. Easter does not change our circumstances; it changes us. The Roman occupation still raged on outside those locked doors. The religious authorities probably were still keeping an eye on the disciples – those priests who promised Pilate, “We have no king but the emperor.”

(This is as good a place as any to clarify that the gospel of John was written in a very specific context of tension within a longstanding Jewish community because of the Jews within it who were beginning to break away as followers of Jesus, and John's use of the term "the Jews" reflects that. We need to recognize this and ensure that we do not fall into the traps of anti-Semitism and anti-Jewish violence that Christians throughout history have used these passages to justify.)

Those emperor-loving religious authorities and the empire they chose to uphold are still out there, with their false accusations and misinformation and willingness to bring about violence, as long as they could keep their own hands clean. That is not what Easter changed. The revolution Jesus brought didn't look like an epic battle with the Risen Christ in the conquering hero role. Easter doesn't overhaul our circumstances; it offers us a different way of living within them. The change comes from within our own hearts, transformed by the grace and love we receive when we encounter the Risen Christ.

As the disciples came to understand that Jesus their friend was now their Risen Lord, they began to remember how he had prepared them to live within empire in ways that sow subversive hope. The resurrection made clear that Rome didn't have the final say about death, which means it didn't have the final say about anything, since death was its most powerful weapon. Even without the political structure overthrown, living with that kind of hope is revolutionary. As Jim Wallis has written, "Hope is believing" – and in this instance we'll assume that to mean, giving our hearts

to the cause of Jesus – “Hope is [giving our hearts] in spite of the evidence, and then watching the evidence change.”

What does Easter change? It changes us. It changes how we live in the midst of this chaotic, confusing, complicated time. It changes how we interpret the imperative to keep our distance from one another, not from fear but for love. It invites us into a new way to live. We are learning what that new way looked like for the disciples in our renewed, online study of the book of Acts. But we are also seeing it playing out all around us, as people respond to deprivation and threat by graciously sharing what they have, checking in on those who are most isolated, and running errands for those who are more at risk. People are making masks for neighbors and strangers alike. People are delivering meals to our nurses. People are creating art and music and silly spectacle to remind us that death does not have the final word.

What does Easter change? It changes us. It dares us to give our hearts to one another, even as Jesus gave his heart to us. It dares us to proclaim that none of the powers-that-be that spread mis-information and false hopes have the true power that comes from loving our neighbors as ourselves. As the disciples came to believe in the Risen Lord, they began to remember that he had, in fact, equipped them for revolution. “If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.” That was an indirect but unmistakable reference to the fact that Roman officials could compel anyone they wanted to carry stuff for them, for a mile, a law that many people no doubt found infuriating and humiliating. But rather than resist it outright, Jesus

suggested, subvert it with love. Go beyond what is forced and turn it into an act of revolutionary kindness. Such an action flips the power dynamics upside down, causing the empire to wobble in delightful, hope-sustaining ways. Is it still there? Sure. But does it have the same power over us anymore? No. What does Easter change? It changes everything. Because it changes our hearts, our circumstances are transformed, even if things still look the same on the surface.

It's a week later. Easter is starting to sink in. Everything is still stuck where it was, but everything is different. May we find the courage and hope to give our hearts to the one we proclaim as Lord and God, and follow in his life-giving footsteps, (even as we remain right where we are)! Hallelujah and Amen!