

Into the Great Unknown

We could think of this story this morning from John 20 as a threshold story where we see the disciples gathered in a room late on Easter Sunday and the mood is bleak.

There is no boldness and they have made sure they have locked the doors because they are afraid and it says they are afraid of the Jews but we know that the crucifixion of Jesus was not so neatly pinned on the Jews. Jesus had become a threat to the people in the religious and the political elite. But on that night, the disciples were wondering if anyone was out looking for *them*. Or was it Jesus they were afraid of? If he was alive what would he say about their own unbelief and denial of him in the last week?

The lock on the door separated the disciples from the great unknown that awaited them on the other side. It seemed like an ending and it was really a new beginning to a new world.

But there in the room with the locked door, the disciples are not experiencing a beautiful world. They might have lost their mission and purpose not yet fully believing that Jesus was alive. They might have lost all sense of curiosity as they let their fear overtake them.

They were at the edge of the map they had known. I wonder what would have happened if one of the disciples had said, “What if we are on the edge of something that we don’t know yet?” It only takes one person to start asking some good questions to a group who feels afraid and stuck. What if there is more than we can see right here in this room? What if God is still with us?

In verse 21, Jesus appears and says, “Peace be with you.” On this side of the resurrection, the peace Jesus extends as the risen Lord is a living and breathing peace, not defeated by the dominant powers or our suspicion but an authentic peace lived out in vulnerability, messiness and discomfort.

“As the Father has sent me so now I am sending you.” And he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

This threshold story shows us that resurrection is hard. There is struggle to experience and believe that Christ is alive and how that changes everything and when you open that closed door will life be different?

You may know the Tolkien quote from the Lord of the Rings, “It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to.”

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Easter 2
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Dangerous business. The disciples' world had become a dangerous place to them. How would they get beyond the locked door?

John, the author, is writing to a community of faith that had never seen the resurrected Christ. How would they believe without seeing? How do *we* believe without seeing, without walking with Jesus, eating with Jesus, looking in his eyes? How do we have courage to be sent without being breathed on?

And John writes in his account that Thomas was not among the disciples when Jesus appeared in the room and he would not believe them, these people he had walked closely with over the years, he didn't believe them. Thomas, a nickname given to him in Aramaic meaning the "Twin" had a given name of Judas and his nickname distinguished him from the other Judas. Nicknames are a part of our culture. I had a friend who called me Bird for a time. You probably have nicknames around here that started with something in childhood and you couldn't get rid of it. John Adams, the first Vice-President, apparently called George Washington, the first President, Old Muttonhead.¹

I would call Thomas, Authentic Thomas.

In that room, in that community, there was space for doubt; Thomas could be himself. Jesus showed up eight days later again and he looked right at Thomas and said, "Go ahead and touch the holes in my hands. I know you need to do that. Take your hand and stick it in my side. Believe."

And Thomas said, "My Lord and my God."

Thomas was drawn to the wounds of Jesus. Maybe he needed to know he would be accepted with all his struggles and his flaws. They wouldn't immediately go away, the struggles, the imperfections, yet courage was given and received in that closed room that then was taken out into the world they lived in.

It is believed that Thomas went on to spread the Gospel as far as India. He also became the patron saint of architects because of all the churches he built.

In Acts 4 we can read about Peter and John speaking boldly before the Sanhedrin after their arrest for teaching and proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus. It says the council couldn't take their eyes off of them and their fascination deepened when they realized they had no formal training of the scriptures.

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What had happened? One day they are hiding in a corner behind a locked door and weeks, months later they are boldly proclaiming Jesus is God and is alive.

Imagine you are together in a room today and you have barred the door. You are waiting together. What happened to make you so afraid?

Can we imagine being afraid of a ruling power like they were at that time? They were afraid for their lives.

What would have to happen for us today to open the doors and not just step cautiously out but go out together boldly?

Just as Jesus came to them in the locked room and breathed on them so we too receive the peace of Jesus. We are to start wherever we are. If we have doubts, we have doubts. Our community can make space for doubts to be voiced *and* stay in relationship because of Jesus. We have an example right here of Jesus doing that.

We start where we are. If we are afraid, we are afraid. Jesus looks us in the eye and invites us to come closer.

Courage isn't the absence of fear. Courage steps out even in fear and we are stronger together.

Being transformed because of the resurrection power of Jesus doesn't mean we have all the answers. It means we trust that God is in whatever we are in with us. God did not abandon us and will not. Even when it seems unclear what is happening; God is still at work.

God doesn't need us to become God and tell others what they are doing wrong or how to live. God doesn't need us to defend God. God is God. God will be fine.

Our brave space is to let people be free, free to be loved by us, free to use their gifts, free to have ideas, free to question, free to not always have to smile and be cheery, free to be authentic people and know they are loved anyway. That will be a community that people will want to be a part of.

AN INVITATION TO A BRAVE SPACE by Micky Scottbey Jones

Together we will create brave space

Because there is no such thing as a "safe space"

We exist in the real world

We all carry scars and we have all caused wounds.

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Easter 2

4/7/2024

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In this space We seek to turn down the volume of the outside world.

We amplify voices that fight to be heard elsewhere,

We call each other to more truth and love

We have the right to start somewhere and continue to grow.

We have the responsibility to examine what we think we know.

We will not be perfect.

It will not always be what we wish it to be

But It will be our brave space together,

And We will work on it side by side.

And Jesus breathed on them and that changed everything. They saw Jesus in their situation bringing peace and wholeness. Nothing on the other side of the door had changed. But after seeing Jesus they had what they needed to see beyond their walls, to peer over the edge to what they had been missing which could lead to growth. Yes, it would be messy and uncomfortable and vulnerable. On this side of the resurrection, the peace Jesus extends as the risen Lord is a living and breathing peace which we have been entrusted with. It gives us courage.

After Jesus appeared, this little band of believers was once again bonded together by the mission of their King and now shared a more complete love for one another, believing in the goodness of the Lord and in each other.

You may feel a lot of different things in this transition time. You might feel confused, angry, impatient, complacent. You might be tired of hearing you are in a transition time.

You are in a transition time and it can be a time to embrace. A time that you can know again that God is with you and is at work even when there is upheaval. That we can be brave and courageous and it is a good time to remember that we are brave and courageous because of Jesus and the resurrection.

The community the letter was written to by John would have known what we call Pentecost, the gift of the Holy Spirit that it was with them already. They may not have seen Jesus with their own eyes but the Spirit of Jesus was with them as we all have too.

Because of the Spirit of the Risen Christ dwelling within us we are capable of working through tough things, starting on journeys of reconciliation, working through resentment and bitterness, working on

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Easter 2

4/7/2024

Luann Yutzy

forgiveness and taking responsibility when we have wronged each other. We have the Spirit among us to guide and to discern together.

The Spirit among us is not an opportunity to be more right than the person next to us. Along with the spirit comes humility and grace. Humility to listen to learn more from each other and where we are starting from and then to bravely step into a space to walk on down the road together- even when the disagreements come up, we can care enough about each other with the Spirit's help that we can stay in relationship.

Thomas didn't quite trust what the community was saying about Jesus being alive and they made space for his questions and doubts.

I wonder what space you need courage to walk into or what space you might need courage to stay in right now in your life? Know that you aren't alone. We can reach out to each other and draw strength from each other.

There can be a great unknown to live into even in relationships we have had for years, in marriages that feel like you've been married forever and you know everything there is to know. Our own families can be places we walk by each other and not really talk deeply to. It takes intentionality to be someone who can listen well. We can step into a brave space by learning more of each other, more than surface talk.

Questions like:

Is there something new you'd love to do?

What keeps you awake at night?

What world would you imagine into existence if you could?

What would have to happen for you to be a part of a faith community?

Being an authentic community could also be started by letting others know how grateful you are for them. That can be a spark that gives courage to people who need to step into something new or keep doing something that is hard.

Verse 30 says "And Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples and these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that through believing you may have life in his name." How we are in community, how we are in our relationships, how we include people wherever they are can be another sign so that others will know and believe Jesus. We hope for authentic faith and it takes courage. Courage is not the absence of fear.

Listen again to the brave space poem. The Spirit speaks to us in many ways.

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Benediction:

May the breath of the Spirit give you boldness and courage to live an authentic faith. “Jesus said to them again, Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Go in peace!