

John 20:19-31

A sermon preached for First UCC Northfield

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May God yet break forth truth and light from these words of scripture and sermon.

Writers like Elizabeth Kubler-Ross make it clear that grief falls into a predictable pattern. By her accounting and study she noted five stages of grief. Denial – or shock, disbelief at what has happened. Anger – intensity of feeling or pain at the loss. Bargaining – voicing “if only” or “what ifs” give us a sense of order or control. Guilt is often bargaining’s companion. Depression – empty feelings present themselves and grief enters at a deeper level. Acceptance – does not mean everything is okay, but peace is made with the reality of the loss. While the stages do not often follow in a neat and tidy course, upon reflection over a loss, many of us could look back and see evidence of these different stages of grief in our reactions.

The tapestry of reactions to Jesus’ resurrection in the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John create a weaving of the breadth of human interaction. Taken together this account of Thomas and the disciples with the story we heard last week from the book of Acts, where Lauren so beautifully drew out the image of staying put and trusting God is with us, provides us a full range of human responses to resurrection.

As I read the story of the disciples and Thomas in the book of John, I see all the stages of grief present within. There is no doubt that the disciples loved Jesus on whom they had been dependent and of whom they were suddenly deprived. In the first few days after his death and resurrection all the symptoms of grief were present. They were alarmed and depressed. They were shattered. We can only imagine their “what if I...” conversations. Who could blame them for holing up and hiding out to be alone in their grief and trying to make sense of what life would hold now.

We might recognize in this story our own grief about these days. The daily encounters where we grieve the things we have long taken for granted. Socially close communication, hugs, unfettered trips for retail therapy, walks that include comfortable encounters with neighbors, dining in restaurants, beers at the brewhouse, visits to apartments and houses, swinging on swings, school lessons in person- so much loss, so much to grieve in these days.

But the scripture story does not just hold the normal grief expressed over a loss or a death, Jesus’ death in this case. The grief reactions are present when confronted with LIFE! Confronted with the Risen Christ, with resurrection itself, there are grief reactions.

By the time we find the disciples huddled in a room we know that they have heard news from Mary Magdalene that she has seen the risen Jesus. Peter and the other disciple whom Jesus loved who saw the empty tomb are also there. They have recovered from their footrace to the tomb which they found empty and yet, here they are hunkered down instead of out in the streets sharing the news of what they have seen with their eyes – an empty tomb and heard with their ears- a witness from Mary that the guy she was talking to by the tomb was not a gardener, but was Jesus himself.

So what are they all still doing there in that house? What has them frozen in place? It is clear they need a visit from Jesus and lo and behold, through a locked door he appears. He shares a greeting of peace instead of a scolding for their denials and betrayals, he breathes the Holy Spirit on them and talks about forgiveness.

But one among them is missing. I always wondered if Thomas was the one to make the “take out” run that day. They tell Thomas, “you just missed Jesus” and his response, “sure, tell me another one. I have to see and touch in order to know.” In any event Thomas is gone and misses the appearance of Jesus.

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Even so, a week after Jesus' appearance, where is everybody? They are in the same house, in the same room, sitting around the same table. Is it denial that has a grip on all of them, even after witnessing Jesus firsthand? Is it bargaining, "if only Jesus would come and visit us again, then we would believe?" Was it depression? Are they just stuck?

It took another visit from Jesus and with Thomas present this time, to knock it into their heads that something is different here. Something has changed! Resurrection has happened.

It makes sense to grieve resurrection – we grieve change!

And what bigger change could God conjure then to turn death into life. I think God finally reached a point and said – how can I get my people's attention – what will it take? What if I turn death itself on its head – will they finally see me at work in the world then? But even confronted with resurrection the disciples seem to grieve the change it brings.

This goes to a notion shared by leadership writer Ron Heifetz who said, "the greatest obstacle to change is grief."

In my previous work as an Associate Conference Minister I experienced the truth of this statement. A good amount of my time in Conference ministry was spent with churches in conflict. I would venture to say that in the conflictual situations I have witnessed, 75% of those contexts included one party or another resistant to change. And in 100% of those times when some party is resistant to change- I could point to some time, some practice, some shift that they are grieving. Sometimes it is a grief over a change in worship, grief over the church one remembers from days gone past, grief over the change in the pastoral role and expectation, grief over a change in music, Sunday school, youth participation. Grief, or maybe more precisely, unresolved grief gets in the way of change. The consequences of this are an inability to say goodbye to something and hello to a new thing.

In my brief time among you, I can bear witness that grief is in play at First UCC. And I mean more grief than Covid-19 has presented to us. As we get to know each other better, I look forward to the ways we can name that and attend to the grief faithfully and see what lessons it is teaching us as we prepare for new life in ministry.

It took a while for resurrection to dawn on the disciples. John the gospel writer writing probably between 50 – 70 years after Jesus' death assures us that grief is still in play when he writes, "Jesus did even more things that are not recorded here, but these are recorded that you may believe and have life in his name." What more would Jesus have to do than rise from the dead in order to convince us of life in his name? But John the gospel writer knew our resistance to embrace change – especially change as radical and stark as resurrection.

A father took his three-year-old daughter out to get her Easter dress, and she was so excited, she blurted out, "I can't wait for Easter, Daddy!" Worried that all their consumer spending might be giving her the wrong idea about the holiday, he asked, "Do you know what Easter means, honey?" And in her own childlike wisdom, she nodded her head, smiled, raised her hands, and at the top of her voice yelled, "Surprise!!" That just about sums it up.

At the heart of resurrection is who God is. Someone expressed it best when they said, God loves us just the way we are, but too much to let us stay that way. So with God we should always be prepared to be surprised. Goodbyes will be hellos, death will be resurrection, grief will not be the last word, doubt will lead to faith and change will be a constant.

We were not in that room huddled away with the disciples, yet somehow or other we have declared ourselves connected. Others have told us and shown us and we have responded. We can't always put it into

words—nor do all of us use exactly the same words—but we have cast our lot with a community that tries to live according to the way of God shown in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

J.B. Phillips wrote a book with the title *Your God is Too Small*. If we take this story of Thomas and the disciples seriously we won't settle for a God who is too small. We'll open ourselves to be "blown away" by sweeping vistas that reach across the entire universe and beyond, and into the minutest detail of our daily existence.

May God give us the grace to be the kind of persons and the kind of fellowship where lives are transformed, and where broken spirits find the strength to hope again!