

John 20:19-31

Unless I See

April 19, 2020 ~ 2nd Sunday of Easter/Earth Care Sunday

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Introduction to text:

The story of Thomas needs little introduction. It takes place on the night of Easter morning in the narrative world of John's Gospel. We are in chapter 20 of its 21 chapters throughout which light, life and belief are interchangeable words all three infused with divine power over darkness, death, and doubt.

Sermon

You really can't blame Thomas. Remember, before Jesus called his disciples into action, at least four of them were fishermen. And since when were fishers reliable reporters on the real size and number of fish they caught? So, when the disciples told Thomas, "You're never going to believe this, but guess who we just saw," His first response was skeptical, sarcastic, "Oh, really." If you were Thomas, would you take their second-hand report on something this incredible and mysterious? Of course, he wanted to see Jesus for himself. Especially being a twin, second hand *anything* rankled him. Thomas must have been the second born of the two—since his nickname was "Didymus", which means "Twin."

And so, Jesus being Jesus, came back a week later. Just for Thomas. Did you notice how the other disciples seemed stuck in place in this post-resurrection story? It was almost as if they hadn't moved from this room in this house for a whole week. Locked up in fear, it seems. Not knowing quite what to do next—even though Jesus had breathed on them, empowered them, commissioned and sent them out the door. Except they hadn't gone. Failure to launch. Until this.

Thank God for Thomas, whose encounter with Jesus, was perhaps what they *all* needed to see. Thomas placed his finger on the wounds from the nails on Jesus' palms, and placed his hand in Jesus' side, then we see skeptical, hang dog Thomas, flip into a full-blown confession, "My Lord and my God!" A week earlier, the disciples simply "rejoiced" when Jesus showed them his hands and side. "Yay! He's back! And here he is!" But Thomas did more. Thomas confessed. Thomas believed. Thomas "be-loved" Christ. Then he and the others, were ready to go.

In this moment, the center point of this story illuminates an earth changing truth: It is from Christ's wounds, that life in Christ's name, and life for all of creation, springs forth. Night turns to day. Death makes way for life. Doubt ignites belief. Right here in this locked room where Jesus came to Thomas and everything changed. No more dark scenes in small rooms with shut doors. If you think about it, it was thanks to Thomas and his need to see Jesus first-hand, that his buddies got jolted out of their torpor, their fever of fear and confusion broken.

How can this story, and the earth-changing truth it holds, speak to us today as we huddle in our homes to defend against the spread of the coronavirus? Now that we are four weeks into our shared disruption and disorientation, I see this story shining resurrection light right where we need it. As we find ourselves up against a virus that literally attacks our lungs and our ability

to breathe, brutally choking the life out of its thousands of victims all over the world, perhaps this story of Jesus breathing mystical power into the lungs of his disciples, may breathe life and light and belief into our spiritual lungs today. When we face our woundedness head-on we see Christ who gives us the Holy Spirit power to unite and to mend us.

Today, in 2020, we definitely need a double dose of this divine vaccine to fight with all our might not just one, but *two* pandemics that threaten our lives. What am I talking about? Listen to the words written by The Rev. Olav Fykse Tveit, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches in his “Pastoral Letter on the Climate Emergency” in December of 2019: “Our faith in the creator, our love for creation, and our discipleship in the company of Jesus are all being put to the test by this crisis. In fact, our futures, the well-being of our common home, and the very existence of our species are at risk. The call to our churches and ourselves could not be clearer; and our unity, solidarity, and determination have never been more needed by the world.”ⁱ I had to read it twice to make sure which crisis he was describing. He was writing about our climate emergency, but the same statement could be said about the crisis of COVID-19.

Furthermore, *both* pandemics, COVID-19 and our climate emergency threaten the “least of these” the very most of all: right here in our country and all over the world, their physical health, their economic livelihood. These experience the devastation first and hardest. Both pandemics shine a light on the human injustice, gaping social wounds which, we are being sent in this passage, to tend. While we are likely more than a year away from discovering a safe and effective vaccine against COVID-19, the vaccine, the antidote to climate change is even more complicated, comprehensive, and confounding.

Rather than overwhelm us with the clear and undeniable data that spells death to our planet unless we change course, I want to share a story by Naomi Shihab Nye called, “Allied with Green” that reads like a parable. And then I will tell you about woman living in Peru, Mama Toya, and her single-handed monumental mission, through the planting of trees, to breathe resurrection life into us all. First, the parable which is excerpted from Naomi Shihab Nye’s very short story. When she writes, “green,” I think God, who created both the color and all things green. Look around, green has got to be God’s favorite color. Her story begins like this:

For her paper on What I believe in, Lucy writes first “the color green.”

That’s how everything starts. A tiny shoot of phrase prickling the mind... Then she runs around for a few days doing other things but noticing the green poking up between building, on sides of roads, in front of even the poorest homes, how pots of green lined on rickety front porches, hanging baskets of green on light posts downtown, the new meticulous xeriscape beds of puffy green grasses and plants alongside the river, are what seem to keep everything else going. If people could not see green from the windows of the hospital, the hospital might fall down. She believes this.

Once she starts making a list, it will not stop.

Green has had a terrible summer. Threatened by the longest drought and highest heat in recorded history, green has had many second thoughts.

Lucy's family could only water with a sprinkler on Wednesday evenings between eight and ten. When she and her mom wash lettuce, blueberries, peaches, they carry the plastic tubs of fruit water outside to pour onto a plant. It's ritual now. It's holy water. The city had a water waster hotline. It made the national news. You could turn people in for excessive watering.

Last semester, when asked to write a paper on addictions, Lucy wrote about trimming and got a C. Her teacher scrawled across the top of the paper, "What is this?" But Lucy often feels happiest with pruning shears in her hand, heading toward an overgrown jasmine vine.

It's a clear task, trimming. The longer you've done it, the more you know how it encourages green, in the long run. Also, you can have fine ideas while trimming. Queen's crown, germander, plumbago. Snip, snip, snip.

She knew it had been mentioned before, but thought she ought to include how cities assault their green for two reasons: money and greed. Later, feeling remorseful, or sickened by the new view, they name everything for green—Oak Meadows, Lone Pine. You could find it almost anywhere now...

Obviously some people were desperate for green...The boulevard wakes up when a strip of green is placed on a white tablecloth.

No one goes to Seattle to see the concrete.

An exhausted kid says, I'm going outside—sick of her mother's voice, she knows she will feel better with bamboo.

In Dallas people run around the lake or refresh themselves at the arboretum.

San Antonians send their kids to summer digging classes at the botanical gardens. The kids come home with broccoli. After a while.

Patience is deeply involved with green. It's required.

So, why don't people respect green as much as they should? This was the serious question growing small fronds and tendrils at the heart of Lucy's paper...

People took green for granted. They assumed it would always be skirting their ugly office buildings and residence and so they didn't give it the attention it deserved. Somewhat like air. Air and green, close cousins...

She loved community gardeners with purple bandannas tied around their heads. She loved their wild projects—rosemary grown so big you could hide in it...

Green could take you away. Save you. But you had to care for it, stroke it, devote yourself to it, pray to it, organize crews for it, bow down to it. You had to say the simple holy prayer, rearranging the words any way you liked best—"Dig, Grow, Deep, Roots, Light, Air Water, Tend."

Tend was a more important verb than most people realized.

You had to carry a bucket.ⁱⁱ

Victoria Trujillo, better known as "Mama Toya" in Peru, has been carrying a bucket for the last two decades planting and tending trees. 30,000 of them! Astounding, but absolutely true. This is what one person, one woman who started this mission at age 64, can do. She has worked with her Villa El Sol community and our Presbyterian Disaster Assistance mission, to plant more than 30,000 trees on the community's contaminated lands. Trees serve as the lungs of the earth. With Mama Toya's tree planting she is helping the earth to breathe. We can think of her as an ICU nurse in the hospital of the Amazon. Her daughter explains, "she has been working out in the hills since sunrise. That's where she is every day, all day. Lifting rocks, moving

soil, watering trees, never stopping.” Mama Toya put it like this, ‘These hills give me life,’ she said. ‘I thought I was going to die and these lands healed me. God healed me. And you walking with me gives me the strength to keep going.’”ⁱⁱⁱ

Walking together gives us strength here at home in Marshfield, as well. When I was on the phone this week with one of our members we were talking about when we might ever get back to normal. And she made the insightful observation, “I kind of hope our new normal isn’t like our old normal.” I believe that Christ breathes the healing power of the Holy Spirit into us for just that purpose. As both pandemics lay bare the wounds and fracture points formerly covered over or ignored, we are being forced to see our world with new eyes.

Jesus is waiting for us, like Thomas, to see and believe. Jesus is waiting for us now to go, as we have been sent, by the one with the wounds in his hands and side. We are being called to find new ways to walk together, with bucket in hand, tending the wounds of God’s glorious creation. That is how we will find the strength to keep going into the new normal we have yet to discover. I hear Jesus calling us to touch the wounds of each person, of every nation, and the wounds of the earth. When we do, we see Jesus. And when we plant a seed of life, light and belief: everyone breathes again.

ⁱ Rev. Olav Fykse Tveit, General Secretary, World Council of Churches, December 2019, “Pastoral Letter on the Climate Emergency,” as quoted in “*Fierce Urgency of Now*” *Earth Day Sunday 2020*, Creation Justice Ministries, PC(USA).

ⁱⁱ Naomi Shihab Nye, *There is no Long Distance Now: Very Short Stories*, “Allied with Green,” (Green Willow Books, imprint of HarperCollins), excerpts, pp. 76-80.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sara Pottschmidt Lisherness, “The Fierce Urgency of Now,” *Mission Crossroads PC(USA) Magazine*, Spring 2020, also see p.16 “Trees of Life” by Jed Hawkes Koball.