

**RESURRECTION STORIES**  
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April 3, 2016  
Second Sunday of Easter  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church  
John 20:19-31

Our reading for today, recounts the second and third (of four) “resurrection stories” included in the Gospel of John. So: let us listen together for what the Spirit may be saying to us, inviting from us, right here, today. From John chapter 20:

*When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the authorities, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side (his wounds) then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” (Which is to say, the power of creation herself.)*

There’s more to the story than that, but that is enough for now.

So its twilight on that first day of the week, and the disciples huddle together in fear. Their beloved teacher has been tortured and executed, and they know they may be next. Their dreams have been shattered, they are broken and terrified, and so they gather together, behind locked doors. And its right there that the Risen One comes and stands among them, saying: Peace be with you. Shalom.

Such a strange story, especially alongside our Easter bonnets and bunnies and brass bands. I do love that our Easter halleluias return in the bright light of springtime. And I rejoice as much as anyone with the return of the sun, the daffodils, the peepers, and the farmers market. But as this story suggests, resurrection is something very different from return. Here, something entirely new is being birthed, something wildly unexpected, unpredictable, mysterious and uncontrollable happening right in the worst pain and deepest darkness.

In fact, the whole Gospel of John is shrouded in shadows. So of course it is in darkness that Jesus slips into the gathered community, unrecognized, just as, he appeared to Mary, unrecognized, in the darkness of daybreak on that same day (in John’s first resurrection story). Dawn, dusk, liminal space where nothing is ever quite as it seems, and everything just may be possible. These were stories told, after all, by and for a community that would be in darkness for a very long time--persecuted for centuries. And yet, it is these oppressed people whose stories remind us: the Risen One keeps showing up, coming through locked doors, rolling away boulders, seeping into rubble over hearts, transforming even death, saying always: Peace be with you. Shalom.

Soon after 9/11, in some of our darkest days, when we were all huddling behind locked doors, in fear and sorrow, this mysterious sketch floated around the internet. Maybe you saw it too. It showed the twin towers, great symbols of our national pride and power, burning, crumbling, bodies falling, all of it held in the wide embrace of the Risen Christ. A stunning image, reminder to those who could see it, that the Spirit of unquenchable life, is with us right in our devastation, with us always, saying: “Peace be with you. Shalom. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” This refrain, it turns out, is not just a promise it’s also an invitation, a *challenge* to allow something new to be born. And in those dark days, there *were* countless stories of new life that burst forth from those mountains of despair and destruction, stories of self sacrifice and

compassion and an outpouring of love and solidarity that came to us from all around the world. Peace be with you. Shalom. Love one another as I love you.

St. Paul's chapel is a tiny sanctuary located right at the base of those towers. In the attacks, its churchyard filled with debris; and yet, not one windowpane or gravestone was damaged. Overnight, it was transformed into a luminous resurrection community, a center of comfort, healing and peace, ministering especially to helpers and rescue workers. Very quickly, it also began serving as a repository for the messages of peace and love that poured out from every corner of the globe. Among them were thousands upon thousands of peace cranes from Japan, many of them created and sent by survivors of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. We know pain, we share your pain. Peace be with you.

It's hard not to despair when you consider just how different our world could be today if we had listened to all those stories of compassion and all those prayers for peace. What if we had opened ourselves as a nation to that outpouring of solidarity in suffering, and allowed our fears to be transformed. What if we had recognized our own role in what transpired, and repented of our idolatry of violence. What if we had listened to the assurance of the Risen One in our midst saying: "peace, peace, peace be with you and in you and through you. Shalom. Through your broken hearts you can mend this broken world."

Because here we are today, still in shadows, still locking our doors and living in fear of anyone just a little different from ourselves, still dedicated to violence as our savior. We are trapped by hatred and divided against ourselves. And so, we suffer, many of us badly. We've all seen the evidence on the evening news; racially motivated hatred is on the rise everywhere, including right here in Jefferson County, hidden in plain sight. From what I am hearing, it's getting worse by the day, and anyone with skin a little darker than mine is bearing the brunt of it all, threats, harassment, and worse. And when those of us with privilege ask—and if you think you don't have it, that's the best indicator that you have the *very most*—when we with privilege ask: how is such a thing possible in 21<sup>st</sup> century America?—I think that's a clue, an invitation to listen a whole more closely to the ongoing suffering in our midst and in our nation. We need to take a good hard look at where we've been, how we got here and whom we want to be when we really decide we want to grow up and live in peace.

I think it's time to listen especially to all those people wounded by racial violence, to listen to our neighbors, to black activists, historians, poets, singers and theologians. It's something I hope we can do together in this gathered community. Among the many voices, I've been listening to lately is African American theologian James Cone in his heart shattering book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Cone insists that we, as Americans, cannot separate those two images. We must, he says, look together at the full extent of racial violence in our ongoing history because, "until we can identify Christ with the re-crucified black body hanging from a lynching tree, there can be no genuine understanding of Christian identity in America, and no deliverance from the brutal legacy of slavery and white supremacy." We must look, he insists, because this devastating reality also contains within it seeds of hope; crucifixion always points us toward the possibility of resurrection.

Cone offers this story out of many thousands: Emmett Till was an innocent child viciously executed by a white mob in 1955. It was only three months later that Rosa Parks was inspired to remain in her seat, and a movement to reclaim dignity burst into life. Civil rights icon John Lewis has said, "we went on Freedom Rides for Emmett Till." Martin Luther King Jr. is impossible to understand apart from this intersection of cross and lynching tree; it fueled his unwavering commitment to nonviolent resistance and his absolute trust in the power of Love rising. And of course, King was also crucified by racial hatred. And his spirit keeps rising up in our midst, proclaiming again and again that Love is stronger than death, and that peace is the only way. And if you need a reminder, go visit the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in

Washington DC, where a rock solid granite King rises up right at the heart of this nation's power center, defiantly calling us out of despair and into hope, and true freedom, together.

Resurrection is not some one-time thing, it is an ongoing story. One that we are free to choose to be part of or not. Life out of death, again and again and again, because love is stronger than any of it. And so the story continues. In John's gospel, it continues with a third resurrection story, a week later. Thomas, who had been absent the first time around, is now back with the gathered community. The story continues:

*Although the doors were shut (again) Jesus came and stood among them (again) and said, (for the third time) "Peace be with you." (Shalom). Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe"— a tricky little phrase that may be better understood if we hear it this way: Do not despair, trust. Which is to say, trust the power of Love that is always rising up in your midst, in your grief, among you, around you and within you, even now. Reach out; be present to the wounds and wounded in your world (and in yourself). Gather together in community. Stand together. Tell resurrection stories. Choose hope. And then: be open to surprise, because Love *will* make all things new. Halleluiah. May it be so.*