

“Unless I See”

Psalm 16 and John 20:19-31

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If the story of Thomas seems familiar to you, it's likely because it's the gospel lectionary text for the Sunday after Easter every year, making it one of only a very few passages read each year in the lectionary cycle. It's a rich text with many themes. In meditating on it again this year, I'm struck by the word peace.

A few reasons for that I think. One is that I was able to participate in the Pax Christi walk again on Good Friday and as we make each stop along our journey we share the refrain, “May the peace of Christ transform our world.” And because it's precisely peace that seems to be so lacking in our world. Not only because there are so many places at war but also because of the ongoing divide in our nation which only seems to be ramping up again for the coming presidential election which while still 18+ months away is already being talked about a lot.

Noting the word, “peace” got me to thinking about how many times I use that word myself and whether or not I really understand the depth and breadth of it. I sign off on my emails that way, “Peace, Kim.” In the context of each worship service, I, and we, use it quite a bit. “Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” I say at the beginning. We exchange the peace of Christ after we make our confession and receive assurance of God's pardon, and at the end of worship, I charge you to remember, “you are God's called and sent people – go out into the world in peace.” Do any of us, in each of these instances, take seriously enough what it means to share peace with one another and to take that peace out into the world? I'll speak only for myself, but when I begin to see Christ's peace as the active agent it appears to be in this story, I realize that I may use that word a bit more casually than perhaps I should.

Earlier in John's gospel, when Jesus is saying goodbye to his disciples on the night of his betrayal, he gives them his peace as a gift. “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid (14:27).” In giving them that gift, he seeks to draw them away from fear. And it seems the same is true on this night. Even with Mary's testimony to them that she's seen the Lord, that he is alive again, they're locked away in a room out of fear, fear that most pernicious enemy of peace.

Thomas gets an undeserved bad reputation from this story. I once saw a cartoon in which an exasperated Thomas laments to two other disciples, “All I'm saying is that we don't call Peter, ‘Denying Peter’ or

Mark, ‘Ran Away Naked Mark,’ why should I be saddled with this title?’ And it’s true, Thomas is no different from the other disciples in the story. To move from being driven by fear to stepping out in peace they all need an experience of the risen Christ. It just so happens that we get to hear Thomas give voice to that need, he’s not asking for anything other than what the others have already seen. And when he does experience Jesus for himself, his response is a full-throated confession, “my Lord and my God!”

So the peace of Christ comes, in part, when we experience the risen Christ and recognize that he’s willing to meet us where we are and when we recognize that he understands our needs, better than we do. The need to be seen and understood is a powerful driving force for human beings and when we feel seen and understood, it goes a long way toward enabling us move away from fear toward the ability to live in peace with one another.

A few years ago a movie called Tigertail was released. It was made by an American film maker of Taiwanese descent whose parents immigrated here to make a new and they hoped better life for themselves and the family they hoped to have. The movie is about a young Taiwanese boy who moves to and becomes an old man in the U.S. I had an opportunity to hear an interview with the filmmaker who said that the basis for the film was his research into his parents’ lives, interviewing them repeatedly to hear about their own journey and the journey of some of their friends who also immigrated here. It was meant to convey the scope of their sacrifice when immigrating. When it was done, the filmmaker was anxious for his parents to see it, wondering how they would respond. When his dad finally watched it, he called his son to say, “Well I’ve watched it three times so far. I’m speechless. I think by the time it comes out, I will have seen it 10 times. I love it. I noticed that you remembered a lot in our life, all in details. That’s amazing. Thank you for trying to understand me.”ⁱ

The interview didn’t say anything about the relationship between these two men prior to the film, given all that his parents shared with him, I imagine it was a good relationship, but I also imagine that there was an entirely elevated level of peace between the two after the film because I too have experienced renewal of peace and relationship with particular people when I felt understood by them and also when I had an opportunity to see them and seek understanding.

So the conclusion I draw from this gospel story is that we can be at peace within ourselves because we can trust that the incarnate, suffering, resurrected Christ sees us, understands us, meets us where we are, and loves us, which means that the reconciliation and unity of all beings with God has been accomplished and that healing is possible for ourselves and the world. And our work as God’s called and sent people, disciples, is to risk taking that internal peace out into the world so that we may become agents of that *same* love in the world.

But now here's the challenge for me every time I come to this conclusion, and I look at the divided, violent state we find ourselves in. Do we seek to see and understand people who seem to be diametrically opposed to what we believe is just behavior regarding racial, gender, and LGBTQ rights

and equality? Or environmental justice? Rights regarding gun ownership? You know the list! Do we need to seek to see and understand even these people? Or is the responsibility to Christ and to justice to shout down and ignore people who think differently? This is a question I've been working out for myself really since coming to Market Square.

This is the way of our incarnate God, to meet people where they are. And the psalmist that Evie read for us earlier, who seems to be in a very peaceful place, reminds us that we have no good apart from God and God's ways. More modern theologian Richard Rohr in his book *The Naked Now* invites us to the challenging joy of non-dual thinking, which is a way of setting aside "either/or" thinking and solutions. In that book he says, "[either/or] thinking is completely inadequate for the major questions and dilemmas of life...[and he asks himself and us] Don't I know that every viewpoint is a view from a point? Don't I know that by now that some of the information is never all of the information? Calm egoless seeing is characteristic of people at the highest levels of doing and loving in all cultures and religions."ⁱⁱ And he also admits that it's a lifetime journey. So in answering my question for myself, "yes, even with people who seem to be diametrically opposed to us, we're called to see and seek understanding."

BUT here's where I think being allies is so important. Because the weight of seeking to see and understand people who think differently should not be on the very people being persecuted by unjust policies and systems. When someone is telling another person they don't have the right to exist or when someone's knee is on the neck of another, we should not expect in those moments for the oppressed person to be seeking understanding. That's up to us who have more power and privilege. It's up to us to seek and even make opportunities for conversation to change hearts and minds, even our own, through seeing, understanding, compromise and consensus-seeking. Rohr again says, "[These ways] are not ways of abdicating essential values, but very often ways of seeking and finding other values, especially community-building, along with giving more people a personal investment in the outcome."

The Messiah comes among us to guide our feet in the way of peace. Those who seek to do so, peacemakers, are called children of God and they are those who cooperate with what God wants to do and is doing. Christ's peace is an active agent in our lives and in the world, may it strengthen and encourage us for life. Amen.

ⁱ NPR Interview between interviewer Ari Shapiro and filmmaker Alan Yang.

<https://www.npr.org/2020/04/14/834460148/writer-director-alan-yang-on-tigertail-a-movie-different-from-his-tv-comedies>

ⁱⁱ Rohr, Richard. *The Naked Now: Learning to see as the mystics see*. The Crossroad Publishing Company. 2009