

Indescribable and Glorious Joy Jars

1 Peter 1: 3-9 and John 20: 19-31

April 19, 2020

Eastminster Presbyterian Church

Each of us has our own understandings, likes and dislikes of the media. I know I do. But, putting that aside, I find myself seeking out news, not so much for information, as for relationship. I search for those things that touch and change my heart for the better. The acts of kindnesses, generosity, prayers and re-building during other tragedies like September 11, Katrina, and any number of mass shootings have left good imprints on my heart. Not downplaying any of these kinds, this virus is a painful story that has infected and affected the whole of our world. None of us has escaped its grip in some form or fashion.

During disasters and tragedies, we are a people accustomed to sharing, especially when we have extra. But this pandemic has sparked the creative spirit of goodness in such a way that people are giving beyond extra to try to help all. This world-wide, unseen invader of mind, body and spirit, has brought me to my knees in humility and gratitude. Like no other time in my life, I am spying people humbling themselves before God. Asking God to be peace and presence for others.

I am glimpsing Jesus' Sermon on the Mount come to life, a world turned upside down for the sake of God's good kingdom. The message of 2 Chronicles 7: 14 jogs through my head and touches my heart multiple times a day: if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

This virus will pass. I am praying from the very depths of my being that the turning back to God will not! I am on an intentional hunt to seek out powerful, life-changing messages for God's good here on earth. I do not want to go back to the way it was; and, I do not want to forget what can be. Thus, the "Joy Jar." I have been collecting prayers, scriptures, blessings, positive sayings, words of hope, and stories of healing that I hope to share with you all someday. These are reminders of all the good God has worked through this unbelievably challenging time.

We are hearing some of the most painful, gut-wrenching stories of life and death, but also stories of people opening up about the strength of their faith and how good God's people are being and the good they are doing. Watching interviews with grieving families puts me back in the rooms of your homes where you have welcomed me when a loved one was dying. Each gathering is different, and yet the same. There are times when the one dying is ready to go and the family ready to say good-bye. And there are times when death comes unexpectedly or too early and saying good-bye is one of the most painful things we do.

But, no matter how death occurs, grief happens even with people of faith who find peace in knowing there is life beyond this world. Sometimes I have no words, but I trust the Spirit knows what is needed. And often in those moments of awkward silence for us, the Spirit is giving permission to feel our human pain even as our faith offers hope.

Author, Sally McKnight, sheds some light on this kind of holy and awkward moment.

She says that when people pour out their painful stories, they are not necessarily listening for our “I know how you feel” words. A person’s pain is his or hers. It is unique. No one feels exactly as you do. Someone else can lose a child, a spouse, even a pet, but they did not lose my child. My spouse. My pet. Add to that in this time, someone lost a job, but not my job. Someone couldn’t visit a relative quarantined, but not my family member. That is not selfish; it is truth. We each have our own unique stories; and, while we can empathize on similar stories, the anxiety and uncertainty we feel is uniquely ours, and it is here in the vulnerable, dark days of our lives, when pain is so uniquely personal that we believe no one can feel what we feel; yet, we most often want someone else to say: I know how you feel; we do not want to bear the grief alone. It is in the horrific, tragic moments of life that people often retreat behind locked doors and safe spaces hoping the reality of pain cannot break in.

This unseen virus has, in many ways, locked us behind our own doors, fearful of being exposed to an illness that has the possibility of leading to death. Is this how the disciples felt? Did Thomas leave the room in search of signs that Jesus was still alive? Was the Lord with them, even though he couldn’t be seen?

This is an emotion-packed story: Hiding behind closed and locked doors; despair looming large as disciples grieve the loss of their friend and teacher; the pain of reality setting in, dead is the one who was to be the Messiah, the deliverer from a people and government who do not understand lives guided by faith. And, death was still a possibility for Jesus’ followers; they were afraid. So many emotions they share in common.

But, McKnight’s statement made us wonder how each individual disciple must have felt, and how would each of us feel? These friends of Jesus are me; they are you; they are us. They, and we, have had our own individual encounters with our Lord; our own walks and talks. Silence with the Lord. And, how are we each feeling now? This pandemic is affecting each one of us and all of us together? What the disciples, and we, are in need of right now is a word of hope and peace in the presence of the unknown. The world is longing to hear, “I know how you feel!” And Jesus does.

Perhaps Thomas needed some extra support for the fear and anxiety he was experiencing. Maybe his friends were so lost in their own grief that he had to look elsewhere for help. We have been there. Thomas chose to leave the room, and in his absence, and in the emptiness of the other disciples’ hearts, Jesus, alive and walking, walks right into their presence and wishes them peace!

Wasting no words, Jesus “knows” what they most need—peace and each other! That day Jesus created a new kind of community, the kind we still need today. We need each other and we need the presence of the Lord with us. And so, Jesus gifts us with a peace that the world cannot give us.

Peace given, Jesus sort of stirs up the pot again by displaying the wounds in his hands and side, ugly reminders of what humanity has done to their Lord. Did they wonder: if God raised Jesus from the dead, why didn’t God also heal his wounds? Maybe. But, the story tells us they saw the wounds and rejoiced! Those wounds were for them a sign that Jesus did understand what they were going through? Jesus, like them, had felt deep trust and betrayal; known love and hate; been abandoned and sheltered; had laughed and suffered and wept. Jesus, like them, felt. And in those common feelings, relationships were born. Jesus will carry these scars as a reminder to the world that all humans, through his death, can live again in a healed relationship with the one who created them. Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us.

Seeing the wounds on their now risen Lord knocked despair and grief out of the picture and placed hope in their hearts. The Lord's new breath was their new breath. It was their invitation to get out from behind the doors and do discipleship. And we cannot fault Thomas for wanting to feel, see and hear what the others had experienced. It is not about a lack of faith; it is about relationship. The old Jesus was gone, but Thomas, wanted a relationship with the new risen Lord? Don't we? The scars in Jesus' hands and side say to us that neither pain nor suffering nor death with separate us from the love of God! When we see the scars, we can, like Thomas, say, the Lord knows how I feel.

Jesus models for us the truth that grieving does not require we have the right answers; it asks of us to let the Lord breathe a word of peace in and through us. In fear and grief, in doubting and pain, in anxiety and uncertainties, Jesus has given us permission to be at peace because he was, and is, and will ever be the final word of hope. He knows our woundedness. He also knows the way to heal those wounds.

This story of the disciples stepping back into the world as Christ's voice, hands, feet, heart may be just what so many of us need to hear today. It is a story about the strength the disciples needed beyond themselves. They could have stayed locked away. Could have eased back into society and their old lives. Thomas could have placed his fingers in the wounds of Jesus and said, I have been cooped up too long; I am seeing things. But, they did not. He could not. Their hearts had been touched by Jesus and they had been given a peace that world could never offer them and there was no going back. The risen Lord has changed their lives forever. They were called to create community with and for other believers in Jesus as Lord.

Gathering in community, seeing one another face to face, helping share the load of life with one another is not what it used to be. We live in a "me world" where many struggle with believing almost anything unless it can be proven. In Jesus' time, believing was less about fact and more about trusting. It was about having faith that God worked good through all and for all. It was about being the extra set of shoulders to bear one another's burdens. Faith was about believing in God's plan, and God's plan was about relationship from creation.

What this pandemic has brought home for so many of us is the realization that loneliness and isolation dull the mind, body and spirit. So often when someone steps away from church for a "break," that break becomes permanently broken. To step back into a community of faith for the first time in a long time or to step in for the first time ever takes courage and energy and determination. But, the gifts received are strength and hope, purpose and community. We intentionally remind each other that the risen Lord breathes new life into us, and gives us the faith and strength and courage to go out to do God's work in the world. In community we discover we have a common calling...to be Christ's peace to the world.

And, the world is searching for a peace that only Christ can give. It comes from a personal relationship with the Lord, that in turn, brings the joy of that relationship to others. It is the kind of peace that touches and changes our hearts for the better, so much so that we want to be used as agents of change for the better for all of God's people. It is the kind of peace that only brings healing only has Jesus can heal.

We are living a painful story right now that has infected and affected the whole of our world. And I pray, that when we find ourselves freed from social distancing, we will-and we will invite others-to come looking for a community of faith that finds its peace, not be the world's standards, but by living out the peace of our Lord. May we go forward seeking out and searching for the acts of kindness, generosity, prayers, and all the ways

God, in Jesus Christ, is re-building our faith, our homes, hearts and our relationships. May each of our own Joy Jars be filled to overflowing.

Hear our prayer: Blessed God, Father of our Lord, thank you for the hope we find in the resurrection of Jesus. Thank you for the new hopes and joys you place before us each day. Give us the strength and faith we need to rejoice, knowing that even though we do not see Jesus, he walks alongside us. May we be humbled by the gift of indescribable and glorious joy that comes with the saving of our souls. Amen