

“Following a Wounded God” by Brenda Seat



Paper doves symbolizing peace hang from the ceiling under a mural at the Church of the Most Holy Apostles Peter and Paul in Lviv, Ukraine. Credit: SOPA Images Limited/Alamy Live News

The Second Sunday of Easter

April 24, 2022

Good morning!

I am preaching today because I opened my big mouth. A few weeks ago, in one of our Celebration Circle mission group meetings we were discussing the new Easter liturgy we were working on, someone raised a question about certain phrases and I vigorously defended them. Before I knew it, I was signed up to preach this Sunday. I didn't even know what the Scriptures were until after our mission group meeting was over.

Luckily, the gospel lesson is about Thomas. I have always had a kind of affinity for Thomas. I know he is pejoratively called "Doubting Thomas," but it always seemed to me that he just said what everyone else was thinking. He just opened his big mouth and said it. So, I feel a certain amount of kinship with Thomas.

When you think about it, without the gloss of piety and theology, what Thomas asked was completely reasonable. He wasn't going to trust anything unless he saw it for himself. How often have we said the same thing about promises made by our leaders? "I'll believe it when I see it," we say skeptically after we hear promises of better roads, lower taxes, or more money for health care. We want to believe, we even vote for people to accomplish these things, but I think inside we are all skeptical, doubting that anything will change.

But I think this doubting goes deeper than just that. It is Easter. Christ is risen we say. But right now, for me, it is hard to see anything but crucifixion.

As you know, I came from an evangelical Christian background. Growing up, Christmas and Easter were celebrated of course, but not the preparation of Advent and Lent. Instead, Easter and Christmas were celebrated much like birthdays. Events that were important and commemorated something that had happened a long time ago. They were important to the faith, in that they indicated that Jesus had been born, died, and was resurrected, and therefore was my personal Savior. Christ was risen, but it was something that happened two thousand years ago.

When I first came to Seekers, I encountered another way of celebrating these important dates of the faith. Here, I realized that the language used is present tense. Christ is

born, Christ is risen, as if it is happening right now, every time these seasons come around. In fact, there was so much emphasis on the present tense that it felt like during the prefatory seasons of Advent and Lent that Christmas and Easter had never happened.

I think I have told this story before, but at some point I expressed my frustration to Deborah, saying something like, "Jesus was born and Jesus was resurrected. It has happened already. Why do we act like Jesus was not born during Advent and has not died and been resurrected during Lent?"

Deborah of course said something very wise, as she always does...which I wish I could remember, because it would make this sermon a whole lot shorter. But of course I do not, so you will have to struggle through this with me.

The story of Thomas appears only in the Gospel of John. John's Gospel is also the most mystical of the four gospels and begins with this wonderful imagery: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." This is a completely different take on the origins of Emanuel, "God with us," than Matthew and Luke, where the genealogy of Jesus is listed in meticulous, mind-numbing detail.

In our first reading today, which is from Acts, Peter and the apostles say to the High Priests: "We are witnesses of these things," meaning Jesus' death and resurrection, "and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given."

So this story of Thomas is one of those events, witnessed and retold over and over again. Most of the time when I hear this story preached the focus is on Thomas's doubt, but I am always drawn to the part where Thomas encounters the wounds in Christ's hands, feet and side. It is when he sees this evidence of Jesus' suffering that he says with awe in his voice: "My Savior and my God."

We move so quickly from Palm Sunday to Easter we sometimes

forget the suffering in this story. We even quickly skip over Jesus' death. We have 40 days in Lent, but the time between Gethsemane, Golgotha and the empty tomb is just three days. Does Christ's woundedness matter to our faith? Or is the focus on resurrection? What does it mean to follow a wounded God?

Now I am a lawyer, and given my religious background I can still tend towards literalism when it comes to biblical interpretation. But I have been on a path away from that tendency for quite a while now. Reading Cynthia Bourgeault, Richard Rohr and taking classes in our School of Christian Growth has helped open my eyes to what Cynthia Bourgeault calls the imaginal. She says:

The imaginal realm is a meeting ground, a place of active exchange between two bandwidths of reality.

The imaginal is that quality of aliveness moving through this realm, interpenetrating, cohering, filling things with the fragrance of implicit meaning whose lines do not converge in this world alone, but at a point beyond.

In the class that Marjory is currently teaching, *The Wisdom of Sophia*, we have been working on identifying those places in scripture where we can see this imaginal place in the Bible – Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, the books of Ruth and Esther, all embody this kind of wisdom teaching that leads us to that imaginal place Cynthia Bourgeault talks about.

I think the Gospel of John and this particular story about Thomas is one of those places where we can clearly see that imaginal place.

As told by the writer of John's Gospel, something liminal happened to the disciples. The doors were locked. That is our first clue – something out of the ordinary was going to happen. They were hiding because they were afraid and

grieving. This is another clue, since fear and grief inevitably open us up to other realities. Then Jesus appears showing them the marks of his crucifixion, and **because** of those marks they knew it was him. This truly is a meeting ground for two different realities – an imaginal place – as Cynthia Bourgeault describes.

Next, the disciples tell Thomas, who wasn't with them, about this experience. They say, "We have seen Jesus!" and he responds, No Way! I won't believe that until I see and touch those nail marks and spear wound.

So, I want to digress just a bit so I can flag this: Resistance like Thomas's will always lead you to engage with whatever you are resisting. Like the law of gravity this is an immutable law of the spiritual journey. If on your spiritual journey you are resistant to something, you will inevitably end up being in situations where you are confronted and challenged by whatever you are resisting. I can look back on a long trail of resistance on my spiritual journey. Using inclusive language for God was a big one, going on silent retreats – I still have trouble with that one, and many, many others. What I have learned is that if you want to grow in your spiritual life, you never get comfortable. There is no "arriving." There is always something to challenge us, to identify and remove the barriers that prevent us from seeing ourselves as God sees us – Beloved and Whole.

But getting back to Thomas – he is at least honest about what he needs and why he is resisting. And then a few days later the disciples are again in a locked room and this time Thomas is with them. Jesus appears and shows Thomas the wounds in his hands and his side and Thomas responds, "My Savior and my God."

What was Thomas resisting? The traditional answer is that he was resisting the idea that Jesus was resurrected. But if that was the case, why doesn't he just say, "Jesus! My Rabbi!"?

Indeed, the other disciples, who saw Jesus first, told Thomas they saw "Jesus."

But Thomas seems to see something beyond just the Jesus he knew. When he says with awe, "My Savior and my God!," I think Thomas recognized that mystical connection between "God with us" and the man he knew as Jesus. Thomas's words in response to what he sees and touches, is not so much a confession of faith, but rather words of recognition, a naming, or a salutation to that mystical reality. He sees the wounds and realizes that a Loving Wounded God is present right then and there and names that presence saying, "My Lord and My God."

I think this story was retold repeatedly to remind us that the crucifixion was an act of embodiment. God was present with Jesus in his suffering, not just observing, but actually present and experiencing his woundedness, his brokenness, his crucifixion. And we know this because in the appearance to the disciples and to Thomas, God's suffering is made visible in the resurrected body of Jesus.

As the writer of John's Gospel so eloquently says:

*Through the Word all things came into being,
and apart from the Word nothing came into being that has come
into being.*

*In the word was life,
and that life was humanity's light—
a Light that shines in the darkness,
a Light that the darkness has never overtaken.*

Breath is life. In Genesis it says out of the chaos God breathed into the darkness and void and creation began. God breathed into the first person and gave them life.

In our reading from Psalms for this Sunday it says, "let everything that breathes praise God."

In the gospel reading it says that when the disciples gathered, Jesus appeared and breathed on them and said "receive the Holy Spirit," and with that breath came the Holy Spirit, "a witness," according to Acts, to the presence and living reality of God in us: God in all things that live and breathe.

Breath is life. And in some mystical way that I cannot put words around, we are all connected in that breath. Our lives are entwined with each other, with all living things and with this planet called Earth. The Creator, the Holy One, is the source of that breath and is present in that breath. For me that means God is present here with us, in every breath we take, with every joy we celebrate, with every death we mourn, with every wound we suffer; God is present, celebrating, suffering, and grieving with us.

Which brings us to the point of my defense in mission group of some phrases in our current liturgy:

Leader: Christ is risen!

People: Christ carries the marks of crucifixion in the war, oppression, and suffering all around us.

*Leader: Christ is **always** risen!*

People: Christ carries the pain of all who live in fear and sorrow.

Leader: Christ is risen in our hearts and in our lives.

*All: Christ is risen indeed, **today and every day.***

Alleluia!

While we were reviewing this portion of the liturgy in our mission group, someone suggested that the highlighted portions be revised to reflect the more traditional wording "Christ is risen" and "Christ is risen indeed, Alleluia," and that is what triggered me and I opened my big mouth and ended up preaching today.

While I can barely say "Christ is Risen," given the

circumstances of the world, it feels enormously true and powerful for me to say "Christ is always risen." Not just long ago, not just at every Easter, but always. "Christ is risen indeed, today and every day," and those words remind me of what Thomas saw – a Loving Wounded God carrying the marks of crucifixion always and today and every day.

I need to be reminded that God is present and embodied in the suffering we see around us, visibly showing us the wounds we inflict on each other and on creation. It lets me know that God suffers with us, God loves us, and that we are not alone. We need that Loving Wounded Resurrected Christ to be present with us now, today, more than ever.

As you know, we have begun to work with the recommendations from the Servant Leadership Working Group. As I look at this situation in the light of Easter and the story of Thomas, I wonder if we are facing into our own time of death and resurrection. These issues are not simple or easy. We need to hear each other and not hold on too tightly to what we have always done, while still being witnesses to what has given us life and made possible a deep transformative spirit. Transformation is hard and often takes time. I want to urge all of us to lower our defenses, notice what we are resisting and be mindful in our interactions of the Loving and Wounded Christ, always present and always with us.

Desmund Tutu, one who knew suffering and crucifixion, said:

God is transfiguring the world right this very moment, through us because God believes in us and because God loves us. What can separate us from the love of God? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. And as we share God's love with...God's other children, there is no tyrant who can resist us, no oppression that cannot be ended, no hunger that cannot be fed, no wound that cannot be healed, no hatred that cannot be turned to love, no dream that cannot be fulfilled.

May it truly be so!

Christ is always Risen!

Christ is risen indeed, today and every day.

Alleluia.