

Title: "Beneath, Beyond, and Blooming by..."
Sermon on April 27, 2025 – 2nd Sunday of Easter
Rev. Lindsey Odom
Reading from the Old Testament: Acts 5:27-32
Reading from the New Testament: John 20:19-31

When I was young, my sisters and I used to visit my grandparents' house often. One thing that I always loved about visiting their house was my grandfather's garden. His garden spanned many acres and produced fruits and vegetables of all different kinds. Grandpa had a sign up in his garden that said, "this is my happy place" and it truly was his happy place. Besides church, family, and friends, his garden meant the world to him. He always had a big smile when he was working in his garden and wanted to share what he had grown with neighbors, friends, and family. One specific memory I will always remember is visiting his garden right before planting season. I got to see my grandfather take perfectly good seeds and bury them in the dirt. One time I remember asking him, "why would you bury something that is meant to grow?" He smiled and responded by saying, "I am not burying them, I am planting them. A seed has to be planted underground in the soil before it sprouts."

At first, a seed is hidden, buried underneath the soil, unseen, and seemingly forgotten. But deep beneath the surface, something is happening. Even though the seed remains unseen, growth is happening in the soil, breaking through into the light. New life is being formed from the dirt and the darkness. Biblical Scholar, Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book titled *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, says that "new life starts in the dark. Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark, which is a powerful reminder that transformation, growth, and resurrection often begin in places of uncertainty, struggle, and waiting." In the same way that a seed is buried before it sprouts, a baby who grows in the darkness of a womb before birth, and like Jesus who was placed in a tomb before resurrection, you may not see it yet, but God is at work forming something new. Even when we cannot see it or we are walking through a season of darkness, deep uncertainty/ doubt, fear, difficulty, or suffering, something sacred is happening in the dark. With all the current traumas, fears, and anxieties that pervade our lives as well as our country and world, it's easy to wonder, "where is God in all this? or

what good can come from this season?” but the good news is that the darkness is not permanent. No matter how dark the season is, God is already at work, preparing something new in us and around us. We witness God’s active presence vividly within our Scripture passage today when Jesus was placed in a tomb before resurrection and God demonstrates God’s power over death by raising Jesus from the dead, resulting in Jesus reappearing to the disciples gathered together in the upper room that first Easter evening. This is where our Gospel reading for this morning picks up. God, in the act of resurrecting Jesus, shows us that God is not done. There is more to the story that calls us to keep our hearts and minds open to what God can and God will do. In today’s Scripture, it confirms this as we read about Jesus’ resurrection and his appearance to the disciples. The first half of the resurrection narrative within the Gospel of John portrays the events of Easter morning, which consists of the finding of the empty tomb and the first appearance of the risen Lord to Mary Magdalene (John 20:1-18). Jesus first appeared to Mary Magdalene and now Jesus instructs her to go and tell his other disciples of his ascension to the Father. So, the second half of the resurrection narrative (John 20:19-23) turns to Jesus’ second appearance to the disciples gathered together in the upper room that first Easter evening, which is where our Gospel reading for this morning picks up. It is worth noting that our Gospel reading for today is tied together in a connected narrative with the first half of the resurrection narrative as the appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene and the appearance of Jesus to the other disciples are back-to-back. The disciples had heard Mary’s testimony about having met the risen Jesus, but unlike Mary’s response of joy, which could not be contained as her vision was transformed and her life was blessed with new possibilities by the reality of the resurrection, this news resulted in a fearful retreat, a meeting held behind locked doors, afraid of the Jewish authorities. This location speaks volumes about the disciples’ confusion, fear, doubt, and efforts at self-protection.

John “paints a portrait of the disciples as engulfed in fear as they did not want to be dragged away like Jesus was.”¹ In this story, it seems that “fear can paralyze us even on an Easter evening when news of

¹ Gench, Frances Taylor. *Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007, pg. 133.

resurrection is abroad.²” The disciples had heard Mary Magdalene’s testimony, but responded by going into protective seclusion, “united in their shared fear and paralyzed state.³” Despite this, Jesus “came and stood among them (John 20:19).” However, not all of Jesus’ disciples were present for the risen Lord’s appearance on that Easter Eve. A disciple by the name of Thomas was not present. Because of this, Thomas needed convincing, stating rather emphatically in verse 25, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” Thomas demanded physical proof by seeing and touching Jesus’ wounds before he would believe. In many biblical commentaries, Thomas has been constrained by an adjective and been coined as doubting Thomas. He has been labeled as a doubter, but his situation is no different than that of his fellow disciples and even us and our fear and doubts that we face on a daily basis when we are threatened by insecurity, chaos, and crises in the face of the unknown.

Thomas, who doubted Jesus’ resurrection until he could see and touch his wounds, is just like the rest of the fear-filled disciples, trembling behind that locked door, wondering what it all means, and he is much like us. He is much like us as there are many times when we find ourselves afraid, wanting to lock the doors and shut the world out, struggling by fears that frighten and demoralize us in our own contexts and within our world today. So, this story is for all of us as Thomas speaks on behalf of the whole Christian community of faith... If we look at it from the perspective of Thomas and his encounter with the risen Lord, he exemplifies the experience of many followers of Jesus Christ in their combination of faith and doubt. But Jesus did not want Thomas to stay in that place of disbelief and doubt. Rather, Jesus met Thomas where he was at and invited him to see and touch his wounds, resulting in Thomas responding with a declaration of faith, “My Lord and my God (verse 28).” Jesus did not want Thomas to stay in a place of disbelief and doubt; rather, he wanted him to share the good news that Jesus is truly

² Gench, Frances Taylor. *Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007, pg. 134.

³ Ibid.

risen - that he has returned to the disciples and is alive with us today and from that divine encounter, be empowered to continue Christ' mission.

We come to understand this more when Christ comes, reveals himself, and enters rooms locked by fear by speaking in a manner of love and concern and saying, "Peace be with you" (John 20:19, 21). He is giving his disciples and his followers the gift of peace. The peace that "Jesus gives to his disciples is the fruit of his decisive victory over the unbelieving world and the powers of evil that his cross represents."⁴ In addition to this, Jesus shows the disciples his wounds, and breathes on them, saying, "receive the Holy Spirit" within verse 22. It is not until the disciples behold the wounds of the cross in Jesus' hands and side, wounds inflicted by Roman authorities, that their fear is transformed into joy and gladness. And it is through the gift of peace and the gift of the Holy Spirit that Jesus promises his enduring presence with his disciples and with us, that he will be with us through all of our involvement in the world.

The gift of Christ's peace is not for the disciples alone as they are to bear it into the life of the world. So, the second outcome of the Lord's risen appearance is mission. Beyond the tomb of Christ results in God's mission for our lives. We see this in verse 21 when it says, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." The risen Lord had come to address the disciple's fears, grant them peace, commission them, and send them out of the locked doors of the Upper Room into the world to continue the mission of Christ. In the midst of the disciples' revelation and encounter of Jesus, there is a mission given—that the disciples are to "continue the Son's own mission, through which God, out of love, seeks to rescue the world from its plight, to salvage a distorted creation." What we receive from our crucified and risen Lord is meant to be shared and practiced. In the resurrection, Jesus did not just return to show that he conquered death, but that he also called his followers into a purpose.

So, Jesus's death, which the disciples thought was the end and would result in a place of total darkness, despair, doubt, and fear, was actually a new beginning for them and for us. It was a new

⁴ Gench, Frances Taylor. *Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007, pg. 135.

beginning into a deeper faith and deeper calling and mission. From the resurrection came a personal invitation to a long-lasting relationship with Jesus—one where we can experience Jesus' never-ending and abundant presence, move from doubt to faith, and receive the opportunity to be part of God's mission in the world. This narrative in the Gospel of John encapsulates the way of love, as it shows us that because of Jesus' resurrection, love is stronger than death and what seems like the end may actually be a new beginning. The purpose of this story is not just to inform us of the risen Lord's appearance on Easter eve, but to transform us—to show us something sacred was happening in the dark and that new life was beginning. The new life that came from Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection on our behalf invites us to abundant life in the name of Jesus so that we can be witnesses to a resurrecting God. Jesus, in His resurrection, chooses to show Thomas His physical wounds—his real, resurrected body. This moment powerfully affirms that physical existence is meaningful in God's plan.

Just like Thomas' doubt was dispelled when he encountered the physical reality of Jesus' risen body, this highlights that our bodies can be used as instruments of faith, helping us to experience and confirm a sense of the Divine within our lives. The story of Doubting Thomas affirms that our bodies are not insignificant; rather, they have meaning, purpose, and a role to play in God's redemptive work. The scene between Jesus and Thomas provides an example of how we should engage with others in Christ's mission—we must meet people where they are, in their doubt, pain, fears, and struggles, and use our own bodies to show Christ's love to a world that is so desperately in need of it. As we do this, we become witnesses of the resurrection—just as Thomas did after he saw Jesus and believed.

Because this story begins with Jesus' reappearing to the disciples, calling us to turn to God, and ends with a commission to go out and share the Good News of God's power to resurrect, heal, and redeem, we are challenged in this season ahead to consider how the resurrection might shape our life and our call. While we may not be able to physically see or touch Christ, like the disciples did, our bodies can still act as vessels for Christ's love, reaching out to others in faith and service. By trusting in God's purpose for our lives and our bodies, we can serve others with love, extending the same grace and care that Jesus showed to Thomas and the other disciples. Our bodies are meaningful, and we have such

viable opportunities to reflect Christ's love and share the power of the resurrection and the continual hope we have in Christ. We must trust that God will use us, in small and big ways, to fulfill God's will. I challenge you to think about this: Are you living with purpose? Are you allowing God to use your body, your presence, your words/ actions, and your daily walk of faith for God's mission?

If not, maybe you ask God to help you walk your faith into the world in such a way that your life becomes an expression of God's love for yourself and everyone else, both within our community and outside of it. Remember, every time you act and lead with love, you are following in Jesus' footsteps and living with purpose, just like Thomas did after he saw and believed in the risen Jesus. Barbara Brown Taylor says, "If you want the world to look a little different the next time you go outside, do some love, do a little or do a lot, but do some, and do not forget to do it." This reminds us that by actively performing acts of love, we have the ability to change the world around us. We, just like the disciples, are being given a lesson—to mirror Jesus and bear Christ's love into the life of the world. We are to be for the world as Christ was.

One way we can be for the world as Christ was is to practice resurrection, to become witnesses of the resurrection. An example of this is to keep an open heart and mind to what God can and will do in you and me, recognizing that today does not need to be the same as tomorrow. If we are formed by our experience of the resurrection, we become people who look for signs of hope, who act with courage in times of uncertainty, who keep faith in the face of fear, and who recognize that night ends and in the morning, there is newness. Being people formed by resurrection involves a commitment to creating newness, justice, and a sense of beloved community. We all yearn for new possibilities that transform "anguish to joy, war to peace, injury to healing, pain to comfort, hatred to love, injustice and alienation to justice and beloved community." Resurrection helps us make these new possibilities concrete as it calls us to a new day, reminding us that God never gives up on us—there is no place God will not go, no person God does not love fully, and no matter how we got there, God does not leave us in the grave or in fear or disbelief. The newness that results from the resurrection, that we are called to be a part of, is "about becoming more alive to life and the vision of community that God dreams for us." By affirming

that today does not need to be the same as tomorrow, we stay connected to the truth that Jesus was resurrected by God on our behalf, the Spirit is on the move, and we are each part of this resurrection reality. As part of this reality, may we recognize that new life is possible and help others to know and experience it, so that it begins to shape us, change us, and become part of our living story. May we remember: beneath the soil, new life is forming; beyond the tomb, a new mission is being given; and by the resurrection, we are blooming into the people God created and called us to be. Blooming by the resurrection, may we recognize how God continues to do new things each day and how we are called to become a people for newness, justice, and beloved community.

Here at SMPC, we are being given new opportunities—to step into a future shaped by hope, renewal, justice, peace, love, and communion with one another and beyond. One clear sign of this is the nearing fulfillment of a long-held goal: the sanctuary mortgage being on track to be fully paid off by the end of this year. This milestone invites us not only to celebrate God's faithful provision but also to reflect on what lies ahead, which is what our scripture passage urges us to do in light of Jesus' resurrection. In light of the resurrection truth revealed in John 20:19–31, we are reminded that just as Jesus sent the disciples out with courage and purpose, Jesus sends us out too. We do not move forward alone; rather, we go with the peace of Christ, the power of the Spirit, and the assurance that even when we cannot see the whole path ahead, we are called to believe, to trust, and to follow, knowing and affirming that God will continue to be faithful as God always has—making a way where we cannot yet see one.

So, let us step into this season of newness with resurrection hope, leaning into God's promises, and boldly embracing the mission to which we are called. May we, like Thomas, move from doubt to belief and step boldly into the purpose God has for us. May we, like Thomas, be transformed by our daily walk and encounter with Christ and begin to practice resurrection through striving to make a difference and make the world a better place each and every day. May we, like Thomas and the rest of the disciples, recognize that from the tomb comes God's mission for all of us—to be for the world as Christ was, in the name of God who loves us, who is love, and who bids us to love one another.