

Unless I See John 20:19-31

Low Sunday

Good morning church! How are you doing? As you know, passion week and Easter is the busiest season for pastors. After pouring out all my energy for a week, I was exhausted for days. I bet it's the same for the church in general. All our excitement and energy level goes down after Easter Sunday. So some people call this Sunday "low Sunday." The pastor is often on vacation; the choir scales back. The high attendance of Easter is back to normal, and we tend to relax a little bit this week. Certainly, I understand the need for rest and recuperation after a busy season.

At the same time though, I have a strange feeling of "So what now?" Christ has risen, so what? Even though Easter day had passed, nothing seems to have changed. Covid-19 is still ravaging the world. As the Covid-19 restriction has loosened, the numbers of mass shootings have risen. Racially motivated hate crimes threaten people of color and every day, millions of people live in fear. Political fissures in the country seem impossible to heal. Our daily lives don't look different even after Easter.

While Christ indeed overcame the power of death, the gospel of the risen Christ doesn't seem to bring any change in our world. We expected God's salvation and redemption, but the world does not seem to be changed at all, including our own personal lives. If you feel this way, that's o.k. You are not alone.

Disciples locked themselves in house

On Easter Day, the disciples heard about Mary Magdalene's witness of the risen Christ but they didn't believe it. Peter saw the empty tomb but he didn't see it as the sign of Christ's resurrection but as a source of disappointment and fear. The disciples were afraid that the Jews may be looking for their next prey so they gathered in a locked house. Fear and lockdown ... these are familiar words to us. Aren't they?

I believe you still remember what happened when Covid-19 first hit our society. Out of fear, people hoarded toilet paper, meat and canned goods. There was enough supply but store shelves were often empty or half empty. Firearm sales spiked and nearly 40 million guns were purchased last year.¹ When society seems unstable and dangerous, we tend to retreat to our familiar places, lock ourselves down and raise our guard. This is our natural instinct. The disciples did the same thing. They withdrew to a house and locked the doors of the house for fear of the Jews. But we must remember that this is not the way to true peace and safety.

I participated in a Holy Saturday vigil hosted by a racial justice committee of the New York Conference. The committee prepared this vigil in response to the rapidly escalating hate crime against AAPI communities. During the meeting, a second-generation Korean American clergywoman shared her own experience of racism and the emotion. It touched my heart. Her brother is a policeman in Atlanta. Due to racial hate crimes against Asian Americans, particularly targeting women and the elderly, her brother told her that he would like to bring her a taser gun and pepper spray for her safety. She said that a taser gun and pepper spray were not for her safety but for self-defense. Self-defense is not safety. Taking a walk with your child in the park, without feeling fear, is safety. Riding the subway without fear of being targeted by a hate crime, that's safety. Going out for grocery shopping without fear of racial harassment, that's safety. Her story enabled me to see how our society has confused safety with self-defense.

¹ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2021/02/10/this-is-how-many-guns-were-sold-in-all-50-states/43371461/>

Increasing security measures or hoarding firearms do not bring true peace and safety. We, Christians, should be free from this false understanding of safety and peace.

The wounds of the risen Christ

The good news is that Jesus appeared to the disciples on the evening of Easter Sunday. He stood among them and said, “Peace be with you” (20:19). He showed them the wounds of the nails in his hands and the hole in his side. I have often wondered why Jesus showed them his wounds. Moreover, why did the resurrected Jesus still have to have wounds in his body? I bet the disciples were terrified when they saw his wounds, because his wounds reminded them of their painful and shameful failure. For Peter, it was a flashback to his denial. Because Jesus’ death on the cross was so traumatic, seeing his wounds would have brought their pain, sorrow, and fear into focus. Why did Jesus still carry wounds in his body even after Easter?

Simply facing a traumatic wound can be painful. However, the wound can also be a source of true healing and compassion. Do you know the symbol for cancer survivors? It’s ribbon. “A purple ribbon is a sign of support for those living with all types of cancer.”² I know some of our church members have gone through such difficult battles. If you are a cancer survivor, you know how it feels and you can be more compassionate to those going through cancer treatment. I lost my father in an accident 12 years ago so I understand the pain of people who have lost their loved ones at an unexpected time.

Because we are not perfect... because the world we live in is far from a perfect paradise, suffering is an inevitable part of life and we all carry scars and wounds in our body and souls. Carrying these wounds is painful. However, wounds and suffering can lead us to maturity. Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross said, “The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen.”

Our wounds can also be a bridge that connects us with fellow human beings. Compassion literally means “to suffer together.” Compassion can heal traumatic wounds in us and others. We learned of this redemptive suffering from our Christ. The nail wounds in his hands and feet are life-giving wounds and we need to see them.

Unless We See...

Just as Jesus showed his wounds to turn the disciples’ despair and suffering into joy and healing, we need to honestly face our wounds in order to heal. A Korean writer wrote a short fable entitled “Crazy Apple Tree” in which people living in a poor, small village decided to plant pear trees to improve their income. The villagers worked together to plant and take care of the pear trees for several years. Finally, the trees bore their first fruits. The only problem was that they were apples, not pears. They made the mistake of confusing apple trees and pear trees. Because they had invested so much energy and time... because they had a high expectation for these trees, they were so disappointed and could not accept their mistake.

So they called the fruit ‘apples’ ‘pears’ When they went to market to sell their ‘pears,’ people from other villages laugh at them because they called their fruit apple pears! They were so humiliated and angry at the apple trees for not bearing pears, that they removed all the apple trees. Hence, all their efforts became nothing and what was left in their heart was despair and

² <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/323448>

anger. Were the apple trees crazy for not bearing pears or was it the people? When we ignore and do not treat our wounds, they may cause other health issues. Likewise, when we ignore the wounds in our world, the wounds get deeper and create other problems.

We must acknowledge that we have wounds. We must face that we, America, have problems. We have problems of “political sectarianism.” We tend to see the world as blue or red, ally or enemy, while missing the beautiful colors of rainbows. Racism has been a deep and open wound in our society and we have not tended this wound enough for healing. The United States is the only country that has active shooter drills in schools. We have to admit that we have problems and we have to see these wounds. Unless we see them, there can be no true healing.

Jesus Christ continues to heal them

Just like the other disciples, Thomas was also devastated by the death of his teacher. He was deeply hurt by his failed hope. Then, the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” He replied to them, “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.” I don’t know what you think of Thomas but I feel like Thomas was not a doubter. He was just afraid of being hurt again by having false hope. I believe we all have had this kind of experience.

When innocent children were killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012, we expected that something would change but nothing changed. When 58 people were killed and 869 people were injured in the Las Vegas shooting in 2017, we expected something would change. But nothing has really changed. When 17 students were killed in the Parkland High School shooting in 2018, we expected something would change but nothing has really changed. When dreams of racial justice are repeatedly shattered..., when justice and equality for LGBTQI communities are rejected again and again, it hurts. It hurts us a lot and we don’t want to be hurt by having another hope dashed. We gradually lose faith in transformation.

To disheartened Thomas, Jesus appeared and said, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” I believe what Jesus Christ has done here is to tend Thomas’ wounds and rekindle the light of hope in him by showing his wounds.

The fact that the risen Christ still carried his wounds means that wounds, no matter how deep and painful they are,... the wounds are not the end. Christ Jesus bore the wounds but he is risen. He is risen indeed! Injustice we experience today hurts us but that’s not the end. Christ has risen with wounds of injustice and has shown us that God’s love and justice will win in the end.

So my friends, don’t turn your eyes away from your wounds, the wounds of other people and the world. Our Christ bore the same wounds of injustice and God raised him from the dead. Don’t try to lock yourself down within your small world. But let us open ourselves to the Holy Spirit and believe God’s kin-dom will come. Face the wounds of our society with hope for healing. With the dream of the peaceable kin-dom of God, be wounded healers and tend the wounds of each other and our neighbors. Amen.