

Sermon preached by the Rev. Penny A. Nash
Sunday, April 23, 2017 | Easter 2, Year A
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, VA

Jesus Gets In Anyway

Years ago, when my children were small, a friend sent me a card. On the front was a picture of a little boy wearing a 1950's era cowboy outfit riding a cow through the living room of a house, firing his toy pistol left and right. And behind him are the signs of all kinds of havoc—the front door knocked off its hinges, pictures dangling crookedly on the walls, the lamp lying on its side. His apron-clad mother stands on the stairs, looking on with widened eyes and an O-shaped mouth expressing startled surprise. Inside the card, the caption read: “You can childproof your house, but they still get in.”

And so, here are the disciples, locked away in their room because they are afraid. Were they afraid of being put on trial themselves? Maybe so. Are they trying to “get back to normal” after the horrifying events of Friday? Perhaps. Are they locked in? Or are they locking something out? My guess is a little of both. That's what we do, isn't it? Try to create a safe zone. Try to put a barrier between ourselves and things that challenge us, things we are afraid of.

And then Jesus gets in anyway and reminds them of the terrible Friday that has somehow been redeemed—the wounds are still there, and yet Jesus is among them, alive, full of the breath of the Spirit. All has been redeemed. And all receive new life.

All except Thomas. Who only wanted what everyone else had gotten, an experience of Jesus in the flesh, wounds and all. He absolutely needs this, he says, and so Jesus comes again and offers himself to Thomas. Touch me, he says, and believe.

After hearing Bryan Stevenson speak at VCU during Holy Week, I see this experience of Thomas and Jesus as an example of what Stevenson calls “getting proximate.” We have to get proximate, to have real human contact in order to be transformed. Transformation doesn't happen from a distance. Thomas needs to stand next to Jesus and see his wounds to understand something he couldn't be convinced of through the stories of his friends.

Resurrection is something that happens in the body, not in the mind, and it is made real to Thomas by a physical experience. But resurrection also is of the Spirit, a power working on a different plane. We see the Spirit's work in its wake—and it might look like the living room of the card my friend sent me. The Spirit does not come to soothe or straighten, but to move us to break out of the places into which we have locked ourselves, separated from the world and its disasters.

More and more, I have come to believe that the way we experience resurrection in our lives is to touch the suffering of others and let that experience transform us. If my goal in life is to stay comfortable (and I admit that on some days that is my goal) nothing is going to change in me or in the world around me except that my locked room is going to get smaller and smaller and beauty and goodness are going to shrivel along with my soul. I'm going to experience emptiness, not the fullness of life.

This transformation may well come unbidden. Despite my best efforts at keeping chaos at bay, Jesus might get in anyway. I can usually tell that I'm in for it if I am feeling adamant about something. That's like sending up a flare to the Holy Spirit come make me do the thing I claim I have no interest in/am afraid of/am convinced I already know all about. Then I get a phone call. A visit. Or an invitation. Or a series of invitations, in case I ignore the first three.

If we are going to be transformed, and if we are going to participate in the transformation of the world (which is our work as Easter people), we are going to have to get proximate to suffering. To touch people's wounds. Heck, to touch our own wounds, if we've been hiding from them. To allow ourselves to get out of our self-styled safe space and into the lives of those who are lost or hungry or different. (And honestly, I think "different" can be the most challenging.) To move toward, instead of moving away from, the things and people that make us uncomfortable and afraid.

And thus we might lose our fear and find our strength and power to follow Jesus and bind up the wounded and befriend the friendless and stand up for those getting kicked around in life.

There is a prayer in the New Zealand Prayer Book I am especially fond of. It's the prayer for this day, and it goes like this:

"Living God, for whom no door is closed, no heart is locked, draw us beyond our doubts, till we see your Christ and touch his wounds where they bleed in others."

This is how we too can make resurrection real in this world. By touching Christ's wounds where they bleed in others. This might well mean that chaos will ensue. Life may get rearranged. Because, after all, despite our best efforts, the Spirit gets in anyway.