

Going Out of His Way – John 20:19-31

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The Easter narrative continues today with the account of what happened in the waning hours of Resurrection Day. It is evening on the first day of the week, John tells us. And clearly the events of Easter morning have turned the day into one of uncertainty, confusion, and even fear in the hearts of the disciples.

The events of this very news-worthy day have not yet been completed, or that's at least what the disciples think. The house where the disciples met was locked. They were fearful of what being aligned with Jesus of Nazareth would mean for them. Jesus having been crucified and laid in a tomb, they worried that the authorities would come after them as accomplices in this insurrection that Jesus had allegedly undertaken.

They also had been informed by Mary Magdalene of something that wasn't quite right at Jesus' tomb that morning. She had announced to them that she had seen the Lord. What was going on? What did she mean by that? Was it for real? Was Jesus really alive?

It may have been like one of those days we live through where a major news event is being reported in real time by the media while the event is still happening. Like election day coverage where votes are being tallied and the results are not yet in, or unfortunately, like one of those mass shootings that have become all too familiar, where the details of how many have been hurt or killed and the status of the shooter are not yet known. In these cases, we know something big has happened, but we don't know the whole story yet.

That's the feeling we get here on the evening of the resurrection. The disciples have gotten a report—a first-hand account even—yet they don't know how much credibility to give it.

Their validation of Mary's story comes when Jesus suddenly enters through their locked doors and appears to them. "Peace be with you," he says. "Receive the Holy Spirit." And he showed them his hands and his side where he had been pierced.

Those who were there got their definitive answer: Jesus was alive. And yet we know there was one disciple who wasn't present in that moment: Thomas. And when told later that Jesus had been there, that they had seen him with their own eyes, Thomas would require his own proof. He would not believe unless he saw with his own eyes. He, too, would have to see the nail marks and the pierced side to believe that Jesus was no longer dead.

Sure enough, a week later, Jesus enters the home again to convince Thomas—to offer him proof—that he was, in fact, alive. Upon his witnessing the marks, Thomas proclaims, “My Lord and my God.” He had his evidence.

It seems to me that, when it comes to our faith, we seem to want proof of God before we believe, too. We want a visible record of what has just occurred.

This past week, I was sitting in the waiting room of our orthodontist, where Joey was having his braces put on his teeth. And also in the waiting room waiting for her child was the mom of another teenager having braces put on. And after a little bit, the daughter appeared with her new smile full of metal. And mom was just giddy over this. Everybody in the waiting room got to witness her joy that her youngest child now had braces on her teeth.

And to mark the occasion, she asked if they could wait around for a few minutes so that she could have her daughter's picture taken with the orthodontist. They had done this for her son, who was the first in their family to have braces. And now, they had to have a record of the youngest child—with the same doctor—appearing in braces for the first time.

Sure enough. Out comes the orthodontist a few minutes later, along with his assistant who participated in this construction. And together with the child, they posed a joyous pose for mom's photo. Into the scrapbook it will go, with the ribbons and other pictures of other momentous occasions in her childhood.

(Joey came out with his new smile a couple minutes after that. And there was no picture-taking for us, although he looks good in his braces. We were out the door.)

Now the mother who took the picture of her daughter with the staff didn't need the picture to have proof of her kid having braces. She could see that with her own eyes. The mom wanted the picture that day to capture the moment for their memories—the day she got braces. That photo, along with all the other pictures of the daughter's childhood, will help them replay her childhood down the road so as to feel the warmth and love of a joyous period in their lives.

When it comes to faith, I don't know that it's the visible proof of Jesus' resurrection we all need as much as reminders of God's presence. Thomas acted like he really needed to see those marks to believe Jesus was alive. But did he really? Or did he simply yearn to be in the presence of Jesus again. Was it the marks in his hands and side that gave him the greatest satisfaction, or was it just being near him inside that house that caused him to exclaim, "My Lord and my God!"?

The disciples wanted and we want, foremost, for God to be near us. And it doesn't take seeing physical marks of his resurrection for us to recognize him when he's close.

Last Sunday, Easter Sunday, after a glorious service in the sanctuary and after a glorious outdoor service in spectacular weather—with terrific music of brass and vocal instruments at both—we were finishing up all the tasks that needed to be done to bring everything back inside after the outdoor service. And the wooden cross with the white drape had been put back up on the chancel. And I peeked in to see it, with the sanctuary empty and the lights off. And even though Jesus was not hanging from that cross, I looked at it and uniquely felt his presence in the room. There was joy in that moment. There was peace. There was the satisfaction of being part of a large gathering of God's people to affirm that Christ is risen from the grave and death is not the final word. In that moment, I knew God was there.

One day during my last term at school I walked out alone in the evening and heard the birds singing in that full chorus of song, which can only be heard at that time of the year at dawn or at sunset. I remember now the shock of surprise with which the sound broke in my ears. It seemed to me that I had never heard the birds

singing before and I wondered whether they sang like this all the year round and I had never noticed it.

As I walked on, I came upon some hawthorn trees in full bloom and again I thought that I had never ever seen such a sight or experienced such sweetness before. If I had been brought suddenly among the trees of the Garden of Paradise and heard a choir of angels singing, I could not have been more surprised.

I came then to where the sun was setting over the playing fields.

A lark rose suddenly from the ground beside the tree where I was standing and poured out its song above my head, and then sank still singing to rest. Everything then grew still as the sunset faded and the veil of dusk began to cover the earth. I remember now the feeling of awe which came over me. I felt inclined to kneel on the ground, as though I had been standing in the presence of an angel; and I hardly dared to look on the face of the sky, because it seemed as though it was but a veil before the face of God.

—Bede Griffiths, *The Golden String* (Templegate, 1980).

Griffiths didn't need to see the marks of Jesus' hands or his pierced side to know right then that God was alive.

Look for the presence of the risen Christ this Easter season. He's here and wants to be in relationship with us.

It's fascinating that Jesus, upon his resurrection, didn't simply ascend into heaven. He, frankly, could've. He had prepared his disciples for his departure (or so he thought they were prepared). But instead, he did appear to them and to others—so that they knew, in fact, that he was alive. But that motive had to be mixed in with another: Jesus wanted to be with his disciples, too. As much as they yearned to be with him, he wanted to share space with these deeply flawed but faithful followers. He called them friends.

And he calls us friends, too. Through his Spirit, he's with us in ways we must look hard to see at times. And on other occasions, we can't help but confess with certainty: My Lord and my God. He goes out of his way to show his great love and devotion.

Christ is risen, and through his Spirit, Christ is here.