“Still Trembling”
John 20: 19-31
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Every culture seems to have a way of naming the impossible. If you’re from the American south you might say, “yeah, that’ll happen when pigs fly.” Cannot count how many times I’ve heard that over the course of my life. In France, they say, “When hens have teeth.” In Spanish speaking countries they say, “when frogs grow hair,” In Russia they say, “when the crayfish whistles on the mountain.” In Italy & Arabic speaking countries, they say, “when donkeys fly,” and in Brazil they say, “not even if the cow coughs.” That’s my favorite. The origin story of pigs flying has Scottish roots from the 17th century, but we also find it in literature. There’s this curious line from Alice in Wonderland. Alice says, “Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.” It’s whimsical. It’s playful. But it also names something true about the human condition: we long to believe in things that don’t quite make sense—things that stretch beyond what we can see or explain. We say these things when we want to be clear: *that’s never going to happen.* It’s our way of setting the boundaries of what we believe is possible. The human mind searches for order — we want to understand the world, we want to make sense of things, we want to organize all the data that comes to our cognitive awareness.

This post-resurrection account from John is a mysterious story that typically focuses on Thomas and his doubts. He’s given the non-scriptural title of “doubting Thomas,” — interesting that it’s never curious Thomas, or scientific experiment Thomas, or spreadsheet and pie chart Thomas, as if he’s the only one we find in scripture that grapples with questioning. Unfortunately, in some corners of the Christian world today, it is still

completely taboo to be curious and faithful at the same time. If you have questions, your faith will be challenged and your relationship with God will be judged. Anything beyond blind acceptance is completely unacceptable. I have to say, If our church was one of those places, I would not be on staff here. I simply would not feel comfortable being in a community of faith where my curiosity and questions and doubts were not accepted as a faithful expression of my spiritual journey. Thank God, this is a place where your whole self is welcomed and accepted.

Mary Magdalene saw the empty tomb, but she didn't believe until the risen Christ appeared to her, and spoke to her directly. When she told the disciples about this encounter, saying "I have seen the Lord!" They ultimately dismissed her, and locked themselves in a room to hide. I'm also reminded that to name the very obvious, we too missed the Easter resurrection by a mere two thousand years. We've never lived at any other time than the time after Easter. We read, we hear the accounts, but we did not see and touch and experience it. We weren't there. Thomas is yearning for something more than the talk — he wants the visceral experience.

I think a similar longing compelled thousands of people across this country to get on planes, hop in cars, or just simply stand out in the middle of their street almost two years ago for the experience of staring at the sun. The total eclipse that happened on April 8, 2024, was truly a moment in history that will not come around again in totality for us in the US for another 18 years — until August 23, 2044, according to the National Solar Observatory. My sons will be 19 and 22, and you better believe we'll be getting on a plane to Montana to experience those few minutes of total darkness. But the total eclipse was more than the sun, wasn't it? It was the absence of the sun, and the return of the sun, both miracles. If you were in the path of total darkness, your body likely registered it, but if you talk to people that experienced it, it was like their minds couldn't quite cognitively grasp what was happening. What drew so many people to experience this? What was that

deep longing? It's almost like there was this yearning to feel dwarfed by something bigger than ourselves. And we knew there was something higher and more in control than all of us, because without our special glasses our eyes would have burned out. I listened to interviews of people who were in the path of total darkness, and they were describing it as almost this quasi-religious experience. "It was…I dunno…cosmic," one person said. With tears rolling down her face, one woman said "It was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen." "I cannot describe the sensation of surprise and mortification…when the sunlight flashed out." In a world of fracturing divisions, growing polarization, demonization of the "other," it's as if we were all longing to turn in the same direction, looking up, and beholding the wonder of it all. Of course, it helped that the timing was limited…we only had to pause and give up control for 3.5 minutes. If you're anything like me, I tried to take a photo, but my iPhone immediately went into correction mode which destroyed it. For 3.5 minutes we all stood together, equally dwarfed by this celestial experience that was happening over our heads. A moment of humility, of awe, of wonder, of unity. Two years later It almost feels unbelievably quaint now, doesn't it?

M. Shawn Copeland reminds us that we cannot talk about Jesus' wounds as if they are abstract or generic. The wounds in his hands and side—the ones Thomas is invited to touch—are not just symbols of suffering. They are the wounds of a man executed by the state, a man who loved boldly and confronted the powers of oppression. These wounds have a story. They come from a particular life, a particular body, a particular act of violence. And if we are to honor the stories of others, we cannot smooth over that or turn pain into something vague and universal. And then there is this moment with Thomas. Jesus does not put his wounds on display for everyone. He offers them in relationship. Jesus invites Thomas to see his wounds so that he might believe. He never expressed impatience or condemnation with Thomas' skepticism, he just simply knew what he needed. And this was to Thomas!—the one who ran,

the one who was not there at the cross, the one still caught in fear and uncertainty and questioning—Jesus extends an invitation: come closer. See. Touch. Know. This is not a demand. It is not proof offered under pressure. It is a vulnerable, relational offering. Jesus entrusts Thomas with his story—his suffering, his trauma, his survival. And in doing so, he meets Thomas right where he is, still shaken, still afraid, still trying to make sense of a world where empire wounds and communities scatter. In this moment, we see that even in resurrection, the wounds remain—and they are not hidden. They are shared, carefully and relationally, as a pathway toward healing, toward trust, and toward belief.

In a New York Times opinion piece, high school senior Elijah Megginson, reflected on the challenge of writing his college application essay. He wrestled with whether to center his story on an absent father, his own mental health struggles, or experiences with violence in his neighborhood. He wondered, "Every time I wrote, and then discarded and then redrafted, I didn't feel good. It felt as if I were trying to gain pity. I knew what I went through was tough and to overcome those challenges was remarkable, but was that all I had to offer? We often expect people to display their wounds—to perform their trauma—in order to be believed or to receive support. There is real power in vulnerability. Many mental health professionals encourage sharing our stories in safe, communal spaces where healing can happen. But when there is a power imbalance—between an admissions committee and an applicant, or an organization and someone seeking support—vulnerability can become a requirement rather than a choice. People may feel pressure to prove their pain in order to be taken seriously. We see this in everything from application essays to crowdfunding campaigns on GoFundMe, where individuals often feel they must demonstrate the depth of their suffering to justify their need. What a difficult reality, that help can feel contingent on being seen as "deserving enough." This is why our benevolence support through the Mike Morris Fellowship Fund is pretty low-barrier. We try to

make it accessible as possible for people who are currently experiencing trauma to get the practical help that they need without jumping through a million hoops. While hearing someone's story can deepen understanding, we must be careful not to turn their wounds into evidence for our validation. That process can be its own form of harm. But Jesus also speaks a deeper truth: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." We, who live centuries removed from that moment, have learned to trust without physical proof. We've learned to trust without digging our hands into the open wounds of Jesus. Perhaps that same posture can shape how we encounter others—choosing to believe their experiences without requiring them to relive their pain as proof.

Theologian Mayra Rivera notes, "A danger of resurrection' talk is that it is often either-or: so if you have resurrection it is the end of trauma, oppression, and suffering. And I want to resist that dichotomy, if only because in the midst of the worst of suffering, there are experiences of what I would call relational transcendence. The examples I'm thinking about have to do with collectivities, and how entire communities engage their struggles and suffering. For example, in a situation as tragic as that of the families of the disappeared, hope may emerge from a group of people still searching for a body to bury—searching together, accompanying one another. For them, just being able to be together in this quest is something that I wouldn't want to play down." Too often talk of the resurrection is treated as an event that occurs when the trauma is over. Many of us have a similar view of conversion, it's a one-time event.

In the Southern Baptist Church that raised me this was explicitly the case. Every worship service, every camp experience, every opportunity the church was gathered together culminated in an alter call. The pastors invited people to accept Jesus into their hearts and told them to mark that specific moment as pivotal — today is the day of your salvation! I don't say this to downplay the importance of making a decision to follow and do the work of

Christ in the world — I wouldn't be standing here today without several of those alter calls — whether I can stomach it today or not, it was the small seed of faith that was planted within me. But how many of us have experienced instant transformation? The changes that truly matter, that truly stick have always come in sideways with starts and stops and shaky small steps forward. Anyone who has ever lived with chronic pain, battled an addiction, stuck out a difficult relationship, suffered from anxiety or depression, knows that genuine conversion is lifelong. Perhaps that's why early Christians referred to their newly found faith as "the way." They knew that this faith was not a destination, or a ticket to heaven, but an invitation to walk on a journey, one slow step at a time. What would our world be like if we treated resurrection less like a one-time event, and more like the very sustenance of our life that happens in the midst of ongoing traumas, oppression, and injustice. What if resurrection grows out of a willingness to breathe life into the empty tombs of this world that are dark, dusty and dead.

Jesus showed up to a trembling group of disciples in a small, locked room. I can imagine them huddled around each other — maybe they were processing aloud the trauma they had just experienced. Or, perhaps they were in such a state of shock that they were silent, we don't really know. But when Jesus shows up in the doorway, speaking a word of peace, it gave them the courage and the will to rise to the occasion before them, continuing the work of love in the world, a love that will rebuild the world as they know it. And in a few weeks, we will celebrate that same spirit moving — not in breath, but in a mighty wind. And not in a small, hidden room, but blowing among a crowd of people joining together in the movement of God.

Author Anne Lamott tells a story about a mom who is tucking in her daughter in at bedtime, and she gives a warm comforting tuck in and says "God is with you, always, you do not need to be afraid!" and leaves like normal. Well this kiddo waits a bit but then the mom hears from the baby monitor, "MOM, I'm scared." Mom comes into her room again and gives a

hug, and one of our favorite stuffed animals, and says again, “It’s okay. God is with you. Now float off to dreamland, and have sweet dreams.” Well, this happens yet AGAIN and finally mom thinks, “Okay this is the last.” (If she is anything like me, she will soon fall asleep BEFORE the child). Mom goes in and tucks the kiddo in again and says, “God is with you.” And in a small whispered voice, the little girls says, “Yes, I know, but I need someone with skin on!”

We all need proof of the existence of God in our own way. We are all Thomas. The good news of the gospel is that every single person has the chance and opportunity and the giftedness every single day to BE God with skin on. We worship a God who shows up wounded, in the midst of our pain, our doubt and our questions. A God who doesn’t reveal himself to his followers all shiny and perfect and new, but still scarred, and he does so without shame or an apology.

We do not need to know exactly how resurrection will unfold among us — what it will look like or how the Spirit will act or move. Are we willing to risk our disbelief to offer salvation to each other? Are we willing to step outside of our comfort zone to work for the justice and peace that this world desperately needs? Are we willing to show up for each other with open wounds, embodying the sacrificial love of God?

Sisters and brothers, we only need to keep showing up with our contributions to growing the power of life among us. A life that endures and love that persists. Even if we are still trembling. Even if we are far from healing. Even if we don’t entirely believe it is possible.