

Second Sunday of Easter | Sermon

John 20:19-31 | Kenji Kuramitsu | St. Paul & the Redeemer | April 24, 2022

"No one ever steps into the same river *twice*," observed the Greek Philosopher **Heraclitus**, "for it's not the same river, and it's not the same person." I thought of this quote when I saw the lectionary text for this week and realized that I preached here on this passage [five years ago](#) today. I peeked online at the SPR archive – the SPRchive – out of cautious curiosity. A bit wary, like when a social media site says "Five Years Ago Today" and thrusts upon you a picture of you in a hairstyle that did not age too well – what did I preach about? I wondered. Did it hold up?

Time changes us, but so too does time change the river, the culture, that we swim in. I want to invite you to think back on where you were half a decade ago. In the Spring of 2017. As our nation was grappling with the aftermath of a turbulent election, issues of race and racism were still not nearly as visible in public discourse. Most of us then weren't used to coming across crumpled medical masks in our glove compartments or pants pockets while doing laundry. Earth day has just passed and the US hasn't yet pulled out of the Paris Climate Accords. The ice caps had a bit more ice in their caps, Jackson Park had a lot more trees – some of our little ones were not yet here on the scene. Maybe you were graduating or retiring or even just starting to think that it might be time to consider leaving that less than fully affirming faith community, or career, or relationship.

As we read scripture throughout our lives, we may note that the Bible has an uncanny way of reading

us back – that is, our relationship with these texts may evolve substantially as our own life circumstances ebb and flow over time. Today's Gospel story, as all of them, takes place about two thousand years ago – another way we might mark this passage of time is to say that this was about twenty-six grandparents ago. Twenty six grandchildren sitting on their grandparents' laps ago, we know that Jesus undergoes a great suffering and is killed. His friends, mourning, cannot anticipate what comes next. Christ first reveals himself to Mary Magdalene, who, weeping, mistakes him for the graveyard gardener. She becomes the first person in the world charged to preach the Gospel. The male disciples, meanwhile, remain locked in a house, huddled inside, frightened of persecution from religious leaders after witnessing their beloved's death.

At this time, Jesus' followers had no political clout – best I can tell they were not invited to the annual prayer breakfasts held by the **Roman Imperial Senate** – and the men greeted that day with their backs pressed against the wall by the threat of the military, the prison, the occupation police force – those institutions that draw death into society.

It's in this bleak landscape that our Lord dares to appear, extending a greeting of peace. He breathes on those gathered, an intimate exchange of vapors, and charges his friends with the authority to responsibly build up common life – with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Thomas the Twin is out, however, perhaps picking fast food for everyone, and when he returns to his bewildered peers, he doesn't believe that Jesus has risen from the dead. Maybe they have seen a ghost. But on our Lord's next appearance, Jesus greets Thomas personally and invites him to probe his own wounds – poke your finger into my scars here, it's really me – before praising the faith of those who haven't seen and still believe – that's us, the readers, all of these grandchildren in the faith later.

St. Thomas himself, perhaps taking after his mentor, in the many years to come will appear in some unexpected places throughout history, cementing a global reputation not fully anticipated by this story. Traditional accounts speak of Thomas' later journeys to China, his miraculous appearances in Latin America, and his martyrdom in Chennai, India, where the spiritual descendants of the Apostle continue to claim this heritage in the Mar Thoma Church.

We better know of Thomas, however, not for his leaps of faith but for his famous doubt. My fantasy is that Thomas says to his friends on that day is: "I want to believe you, but how can I trust this without knowing for sure?" Maybe anyone who's gotten a strangely demanding email from a suspicious sounding "Reverend Catherine Healy" in these past few years may understand Thomas' hesitancy. Is it really you Lord? Why are you asking me for iTunes gift cards? Is this what you meant by "phishers of men"?

One of the things I value most about our wing of the Christian family is our rich, intellectual commitment to exploring the role of doubt in the life of faith – our embrace of the value of asking questions, the critical mind and "the hermeneutics

of suspicion," as they might say in yonder university down the street.

Yet both the church and the academy, really the West as a whole, also have a long legacy of strained relationships with the body, associating the flesh with the profane. We may emphasize our cognition and think of our bodies as dull machinery or rote fuel. We tend to value certain kinds of bodies over others. In that message five years ago I shared a quote from Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. "Yonder they do not love your flesh," intones Baby Suggs, a once-enslaved preacher: "yonder, they despise it."

We tell stories about perfect bodies, gossamer bodies that don't age, that don't tear or sag or easily damage, needing frequent rest and repair. In some of these stories, we're even taught to recognize the villain by the presence of his scars. Disability and transgender theologians, then, note the curious fact that in the Resurrection, our Lord's risen body bears exactly these disfiguring marks. We might have expected Christ to return with seamless, airbrushed Instagrammable influencer skin but he retains particular wounds - disablements? Surgery scars? - coming back sun-darkened and calloused enough to be mistaken as the landscaper – holes in his hands, such that he might remind us of one recovering from a major operation. One where you can't lift your arms higher than this without wincing in pain..

Thomas learns that the Risen Body of Christ has wounds. And I wonder if that also intimates that we, the Body of Christ, as the Church, are allowed to have wounds as well – pain points emanating from those trying times in our own lives – and in the wider body politic. We've come to know something more, I think, in these past five years, about these national scars, ones as American as

apple pie: some of you have joined us for the racial justice history walking tours of the neighborhood here over the years. Over on 48th and Ellis there's a house that was turned into a prison for Japanese Americans and others during world war two. We just passed the 100 year anniversary of the Chicago race massacre – this was one grandparent ago. Even now, Hyde Park retains a unique place in debates about the role of policing and public safety as our city remains freshly pained by ongoing violence. On a neighborhood, as on a body, scar tissue is legible history. Maybe this is why Thomas invited to verify Jesus' identity on the basis of these injuries, watermarks as personal as a set of fingerprints.

The text says that Jesus breathes on his friends once they recognize him. Breath is a special theme in the Bible and has been a hot topic for all of human history, but maybe especially since March of 2020. So much of what we know as human culture boils down to the simple act of people exchanging vapors near one another. Aerosolized droplets mingling in stadiums and symphonies, in cathedrals and classrooms, at awards ceremonies and funeral parlors and coffeeshops - it was for fear of breathing and being breathed upon that we took a season to hold church virtually.

I must admit that Bri and I were not the most faithful attendees of online services in these times. And when we came back in person I was so excited – and it felt like a lot. It was so bright, so loud, so many people, so many hands to shake or not to shake – I've heard from others how overwhelming, how overstimulating it was to be back in the flesh, shocked by our senses right back into the land of the living. How loud babies cry! How echoey our church is! How the footsteps of these new little ones - so many new little ones - pitter-patter

aggressively in the mad dash to children's chapel at the 9:15. How the bulletins rustle like a great breath of wind as we all turn the pages at the same time.

How something as simple as eye contact, a service mourning someone we love, a note from the pastoral care committee, as a warm touch on the arm or a shared meal can make us feel safer and connected to those we call Beloved.

The disciples may have feared an apparition when they first saw Jesus amidst their fraternity of disarray – hiding in this haunted house stained by the sour sweat of fear and trauma. But this is not a ghost story - Jesus makes contact with those he loves and we witness this delicate moment in the complex journey of someone we love coming back to life after the unimaginable.

So too when we saw one another again here, we asked, as Thomas may have: "is it really you?" By which we meant: how have you been? How have you been making it through?

When attacks on Asian Americans increased in the earlier months of COVID, I heard from fellow parishioners like Rahsaan Clark Morris who asked how I was holding up, if my family was safe, who said let us know if you need anything.

So many of us have visibly and invisibly offered care to one another - and maybe even harder, received that care - as our church has navigated tremendous change - as we've lost those we loved and as we've welcomed new faces into the fold.

Just as Jesus has been altered by his plunge into the river Styx, so too do those times we're thrust into the deep end stay with us. We retain all of our stories, all of our scars. And we also have the Holy

Spirit, one another, our past and selves and ways of being not yet realized.

So may we too not only be changed by these times but press our hands to the wheel as we seek to heal and to build. May the Communion meal we are about to share shape our imaginations for a resurrected life contoured by these sacred stories, by our grandparents in the faith. And may you join with the God who calls you into life, who honors your scars, this God who Themselves walked the way of suffering and is waiting for us even now, wounded hands stretched out to call us into life.