

*What Next?*

John 20:19-31

April 11, 2010

Whitefish UMC

- † Welcome to what is known by church workers as “Low Sunday.” For many, the Sunday after Easter is the church’s occasion for an exhausted collapse. So many churches have adopted this day as “Holy Humor Sunday.” It’s one way to get people to come back to church after the hoopla of Easter.
- † One pastor uses this Sunday to recount a trip to Memphis, the holy land of Elvis fans. She is a good southern woman and likes to compare Jesus to Elvis. She’s not the first to do this, and one of the notable scholars on this topic is none other than Adam Sandler. He explains:
- † Jesus said “Love thy neighbor.” (Matthew 22:39) Elvis said: “Don’t be cruel.” (RCA 1956). Jesus is part of the Trinity; Elvis’ first band was a trio. Jesus is the Lord’s shepherd; Elvis dated Cybil Sheppard.
- † Given that kind of reverence, she says that we as Jesus fans have a lot to learn from Elvis fans, especially in terms of faith. When she visited Graceland on her trip to Memphis, the pastor turned to a tour guide and asked, “So how long did Elvis actually live here?” There was an audible gasp from the surrounding crowd. The guide looked at her with shock and whispered, “We don’t use the past tense here.” She then pointed at her t-shirt, which read: “Graceland, where Elvis LIVES.”
- † It didn’t matter that she had never actually seen Elvis or that technically Elvis stopped walking the earth over thirty-two years ago. It didn’t matter.

She didn't care. Elvis fans don't care. Without any proof, they believe he lives. Elvis lives, baby. The King lives.

- † That certainly wasn't what the disciples experienced that first Easter evening. For that night, Jesus' closest friends and followers were doing the only reasonable thing after their leader had been cruelly executed—they went into hiding. Someone found a safe house in Jerusalem, and they were gathered there—locked behind stout doors that would be hard to break down.
- † They had been there since Friday afternoon, but now one of them was missing for some reason—perhaps to buy food or assess the situation outside. You see they were hiding because they were afraid of being rounded up as Jesus had been, and killed for being friends of the crucified Nazarene.
- † Of course earlier that day, before dawn, a few of the women had ventured out while it was still dark. They had gone to anoint his body with spices and ointments and had returned wide-eyed and out of breath. What they had to say seemed the result of hysteria among women whose word couldn't be trusted—they claimed his body was gone, that angels had spoken to them, that the huge stone had been rolled away. Mary even claimed to have spoken with him—to have seen him with her own eyes—alive! What nonsense was this—an idle tale, said some.
- † And then something that would change them forever happened. Suddenly Jesus was before them, and they didn't know what to think. Was it just wishful thinking? Were they hallucinating in their fear? He even spoke to them, and what he said was “Peace be with you.”
- † So they would be sure to hear and understand what he said, he repeated his greeting again, “Peace be with you.” And then he told them why he was

there, why they were given this time with him: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

† As one preacher says, “The point here is to get these people out of that room. The point here is to give them enough peace, enough of his spirit—his life and breath—to get them up and moving again. The point here—the point of Easter—is to get frightened, discouraged men and women who are very much inclined to stay put, to stay in the room as long as necessary, to get them up and moving toward the door, toward the streets of the city, toward their homes and families and communities—toward, that is to say, life in this beautiful world now suddenly, dramatically, and profoundly different because Jesus has come to them and breathed on them and sent them.”  
(Buchanan)

† But remember, one of them is missing. He is Thomas, who gets a bad rap by being called Doubting Thomas. Think of him instead as practical Thomas, realistic Thomas. So when the disciples tell him that they have seen Jesus and that he has sent them out, he wants to see for himself, and who can blame him?

† Fast forward to the next Sunday, “Low Sunday,” and Jesus’ followers and disciples are back in that room again, the doors shut. Thomas is with them this time. And Jesus joins them again and repeats his greeting of peace. Then he says to Thomas, “Put your finger here—see my hands—reach out your hand. And the most amazing thing—Thomas doesn’t do it, doesn’t have to touch Jesus to erase his doubts. Instead he offers a confession of faith and trust: “My Lord and my God.”

† For Thomas has seen something that makes him move from uncertainty to strength and action. He has seen the scars that still mark Jesus. This is no ghost, no angelically restored, perfect vision—the scars of Jesus’ suffering

and crucifixion are still there. And here hangs the whole basis for continuing beyond the glories and joy of Easter morning.

- † Were it not for the scars on Jesus' resurrected body, we would be right to ask, "What is the point of all this? Is there a point? Is Easter, with all its wonderful celebration, an end to itself, or does it lead somewhere?"
- † Earnest Hemingway has written "The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong in the broken places." It sounds like something that should be in the Bible, doesn't it? And though the Bible doesn't quote Hemingway's sentence directly, today's gospel passage certainly evokes it.
- † For the broken places sometimes leave scars, and scars are signs of healing. They are often ugly, but they remind us of all that we have been through. Eugene Peterson has written: *This wound of the self that calls for help, this self that is closed in upon itself and now is open just a little bit, is an opening through which we can listen to and answer God. For the wound is more than a wound. It is access to the outside, to God, and to others....*
- † *The wound must not be bandaged over as fast as possible; it is there to be a listening post, a chance to exit the small confines of the self-defined world and enter the spaciousness of a God-defined world.*
- † And in Bread for the Journey, Henri Nouwen writes that *Jesus invites us to embrace our brokenness as he embraced the cross and live it as part of our mission. He asks us not to reject our brokenness as a curse from God that reminds us of our sinfulness but to accept it and put it under God's blessing for our purification and sanctification. Thus, our brokenness can become a gateway to new life.*
- † I have a friend and former employee who developed breast cancer. Before her diagnosis, she was a driven, self-absorbed workaholic. She likes to say that her cancer was the best thing that ever happened to her. We weren't

very good friends until after her diagnosis. As one of my most excellent staff researchers, she was always pushing the envelope of what she perceived as her rights as an employee—her demands were always more important than other people’s needs.

- † I remember her coming over to my house after her surgery and saying, “I know that I am called to change, to be more compassionate, to help others who are going through this, to live more intentionally.” And she did.
- † Now most of us wouldn’t go so far as to say that cancer or some other tragic event that creates scars is the best thing that ever happened to us. But we do have a choice in how we move forward after whatever experience it is that wounds us and creates scars as we heal.
- † It’s even stretching it to give thanks for the wounds of the past, even if they do make us strong in the broken places. But as followers of Jesus, we are called to offer our scars for the healing of the world, and not stay locked in the proverbial hiding place of our own story.
- † Instead Jesus calls us out into the world, to put our hands on the marks of its suffering, to bring good news and hope to all of God’s children. Isn’t that the mission of our church? To love the world in every possible way, to love the world as God did and does?
- † We may feel overwhelmed on the second Sunday of Easter, just as the disciples were, even though we have experienced the risen Jesus on Easter Sunday. We may feel like locking our doors and hiding out. But the risen Jesus comes to us in the midst of our fears, our doubts, and says, “Peace be with you.”
- † Whatever hunger we feel, God calls us to the table, feeds us well, and sends us out into the world to be justice and peace, salt and light, hope for the world. We can do it, by the power of His spirit, his life and breath filling us

with his peace and strength. For as God sent Jesus, God sends us, too, into the world that God loves.

- † Thomas didn't end up touching Jesus because Jesus touched him with his scars, his spirit. There is a wonderful song written by John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community called "A Touching Place." The chorus goes like this: "To the lost, Christ shows his face. To the unloved, he gives his embrace; to those who cry in pain or disgrace, Christ makes with his friends a touching place."
- † As we remember how Jesus touched his friends by washing their feet, loving them and giving them himself, in Holy Communion, we'll come forward to the haunting music and words of this song. May we, the friends and followers of Jesus, be a touching place for the world. May our scars become signs of strength in the broken places, and may, by Christ's spirit, be part of the healing of the world.
- † For we remember that on the night....

Sources:

John Bell and Graham Maule, "A Touching Place," from the album "God Never Sleeps," GIA Music.

James Harnish, "Scars," in Blogging Toward Sunday, <http://theolog.org>

Rev. Susan Sparks, "Trust Jesus and Elvis," <http://day1.org>

John Buchanan, "Sent," <http://fourthchurch.org>