

# St James United Church



## Message for April 12, 2025 Second Sunday of Easter

“Grieving Thomas” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

1 Peter 1:3-9 and 22-28; John 20:19-29; and Leonard Cohen “Anthem” (from *The Future*, 1992)

I don't think we should be allowed to give the apostles nicknames. First, as I suggested last week, we turned Mary's Magdalene moniker into a place name when it more likely meant she was a towering figure in the early church, then based on today's gospel, we dubbed Thomas a doubter when he really should be called Grieving Thomas. I feel that's why he wasn't with the rest of the disciples. He wanted to grieve alone. And he clearly still felt that when the others told him that Jesus had been raised. To drive that point home, when Jesus does appear again, he tells Thomas to touch his wounds, inviting him to lean into his grief, not avoid it.

This is key in these difficult times. Many of us feel uncertain, grief-stricken. But Jesus comes as wounded even as he is risen, reassuring us that resurrection is possible even in the most difficult times personally and collectively. To quote womanist theologian Yolanda Pierce in *The Wounds Are the Witness*, the resurrection story offers “a theology for the wounded, for those who are still healing, and even for those who aren't quite ready for healing...The risen Saviour, who had been abandoned, denied, betrayed, and crucified, doesn't hide his wounds or rush their healing.” She then asks if we can follow suit and summon the kindness to acknowledge we need time to heal. In that time, Jesus is present, coming to us again and again with mercy, compassion and love.

Jesus comes, giving us strength and hope, inviting us to lean into our suffering because through the embrace of our woundedness, engaging our struggle, resurrection happens. In many ways this is the gospel, God bringing life amid death, showing love as everyone spits hate, shining with light through the cracks of our lives to paraphrase Leonard Cohen. Now in this I don't mean to elevate suffering for its own sake. It needs to be lifted where possible. But still, resurrection comes as we pass through the tomb, not pretending it isn't there. That can be hard work, the hurts we've experienced painful to face. As I shared a few weeks ago, it can be beneficial to see someone who can help us do that. But as we do, we find new life, gain some insight. The incidents that brought the hurt don't disappear, but we see them and ourselves in a new way.

We need to because hurt that remains hidden doesn't really stay that way, always comes out in other ways, often in us hurting others. This is one reason why Jesus breathes his Spirit on his and says they are to bring forgiveness. We need to help each other to face hurts and to heal if we are to find life both personally and collectively. If we don't, then the kind of world Jesus embodied and died to protect can't be born. Unresolved hurt often manifests as fear, especially toward strangers, those who are different. We see this in our gospel, the disciples locked away. Jesus must appear to them as a stranger. Recall how often the disciples don't recognize Jesus right away after the resurrection. I see no reason why this is not the case here. But he breaks

through their fear with a word of shalom, a call to reconnect with others, to bring reconciliation, to heal the divisions that are so often caused by our wounds.

I wonder if in North America, we're creating a Christianity that's forgotten that, doing so in large because we avoid facing our wounds and let them fester into fear. That process started, I wonder, when as Protestants we chose a cross not a crucifix as our symbol. It isn't why we chose that, but over time we've been able to avoid thinking about the suffering Jesus endured, and our call to take up our cross too, leading us toward what Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer called cheap grace, trusting that we are forgiven through Jesus' death, but not really repenting, not really following Jesus or accepting the cross in our lives. If we did repent, then we'd change our behaviour. But we can only do that if we confront the roots of our actions, which again means facing our wounds. As I said, this can be painful, but as we look at Jesus and his suffering, we see in him the courage and strength to hold onto the wounds, even the fears, and transform them so that we stop hurting people because we are hurt people. Without that, we turn the cross into a symbol of victory over death, focused on the afterlife, rather than a symbol that calls us to destroy death, confront the dealers of death and the suffering they cause, in this life.

But as we distance ourselves from Jesus' suffering on the cross, and our sharing in suffering with him, we risk distancing ourselves from the suffering of others. We may even link their suffering to personal weakness and the next thing we know we've stopped caring for them and the cross has been turned into a symbol of power. But the Risen Jesus comes with wounds still visible to stand against that misappropriation of the cross, reminding us that his life is experienced not in clinging to power but as we let it go and we are vulnerable in our woundedness, inviting us not only to have compassion for ourselves in that but to have compassion for others, and in our love for them, to risk further wounding if it means we can lift their suffering.

This is the point made by the author of First Peter as he links the suffering Jesus faced with what the recipients of his letter were facing, and promised that as that suffering brought Jesus to glory it would be a source of new life for them. You see, he's writing to non-citizens, Jewish Christians in the diaspora along with Gentiles who chose not to align with the empire and the many ways it brought death and suffering to the majority in order to bring comfort to only a few. Their decision not to practice the imperial religion and instead follow the communal and compassionate way of Jesus meant that they were persecuted, mocked and derided. That is critical for us in this time as our world, even our churches, are increasingly aligned with imperial values and not the way of Jesus. Like them, we are being called to double down on his way, even if it means we let go of comforts gained on others' backs, show hospitality to strangers when others are hostile because of it, will confront the death dealers of our time, even at risk to our lives. That too is gospel.

The Easter mystery we celebrate is not about triumph but hope in the face of struggle, trusting that the Risen Christ is with us in it. Jesus came to Grieving Thomas, telling him to touch his wounds, to touch his own. Jesus calls us to the same, helping us heal, and not just for our own sake, but so we in turn can heal others, so we in turn can help Jesus to heal our world. May we take up his invitation. Amen.