

A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts
Preached by the Rev. Jacqueline Clark on April 26, 2020 (Easter 3 Year A)

One of my colleagues has a practice of beginning a new topic by asking children what they know about it. She says things like, tell me everything you know about Jesus. And then she listens carefully, writing everything the children say onto a big whiteboard. In listening to them, she unearths what her children have already been told or absorbed or imagined or just know-- the story they already carry, the inaccuracies and judgments and deep truths all mixed up together. Then she knows the story she is working with, what needs affirming and also what needs to be probed or challenged.

This morning's Gospel takes us back to Easter Sunday, but this time, in the Gospel of Luke. In this version of the story, the women—Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary, and unnamed others—go to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body. They find it empty, until two men in dazzling white appear to tell them that Jesus is risen. They run and tell the rest of the disciples. But as Luke tell us, "these words seemed to them an idle tale, and [the disciples] did not believe them." They could not believe them. *Something has been broken.*

That same afternoon, in the heat of the day, Cleopas and his companion leave Jerusalem for Emmaus. They are sorrowful, their steps heavy. I wonder if they are going back home. A week earlier they had arrived in Jerusalem with anxious anticipation. They had seen Jesus do such amazing deeds of power, had heard him speak words that consoled and challenged and stirred them and convinced them that Jesus was more than just a teacher. "We had hoped," they say, "that he was the one to redeem Israel." Had hoped. Past tense. In the week since, they have experienced trauma. They have watched as Jesus was arrested, convicted, humiliated, and then executed in brutal fashion. We had hoped, they say. But that hope is no more. Why would they stay? They might as well go home, go back to the way things were, before they had dared to hope.

There, on that quiet road in the heat of the day, there in their resignation, is when the resurrected Jesus makes his first appearance. "Jesus himself came near and went with them." He asks them, "what are you discussing with each other as you walk along?" Even to speak of it hurts. They stand still, looking sad, and ask, "Do you really not know? Are you the only stranger out of the thousands of pilgrims in Jerusalem who does *not* know the things that have taken place?" To which Jesus says, "What things?" Tell me everything you know. Tell me the story you are carrying about what happened.

The story they are carrying is this: We had hoped that Jesus was the one to redeem Israel. But he was condemned to death and crucified. *Something fundamental has been broken.* We want nothing more to believe the women, but we can't. Their words cause us nothing but pain. Jesus was crucified and died. It could not possibly be true.

Their reasoning is completely logical. It makes perfect sense. But the work of the church, as one theologian puts it, is to reorder our imaginations. That is what Jesus does here. Look again, he says. Look at all of our sacred stories. This is not the first time something has been broken. We have been here before, at places that look like the end—the end of meaning, the end of purpose, the end of hope. We were enslaved in Egypt. We were stuck between the Egyptian army and the Red Sea. We have been conquered, again and again. We were exiled from the Promised Land. Our temple was destroyed. In each of those times, *something fundamental was broken.* But every one of those times, in the midst of the terrible horrible no good very bad breaking, something was also broken open. Through the love and faithfulness of God, something new became possible.

When I was a freshman in college, my grandmother died very suddenly. My aunt had this sense that something was wrong. She called and called and couldn't get through. Finally my mom stopped by to check in, and found that she had died. It was awful.

On the day my grandma died, my grandfather had not spoken to my mom in almost thirty years. When she was sixteen, he got mad at her over something pretty trivial, and he simply stopped talking to her. He refused to start again—not when she graduated high school, not when she asked him to come to her wedding, not when his grandchildren were born. When we visited my grandparents, who lived just a mile away, mom, who wanted us to have a relationship with our grandpa, would send us upstairs to visit with him while she stayed downstairs with grandma.

When my grandmother died, *something was broken*. And in the midst of that, something was also broken open. Something new became possible. Grandpa started talking to mom. And my mom's love was so strong that she decided that she was willing to listen. It did not erase what had come before, the years of hurt and pain. But they began to build a new relationship. For the last twelve or so years of his life, my mom, along with her brother and sisters, helped to take care of my grandfather, visiting, helping him pay the bills, cooking him his favorite Polish dishes. They kept talking until the day that he died.

I have been surprised to find that in the wake of Easter this year, the primary thing I am feeling is sadness. I am just so sad that Jesus suffered and died. I don't want that to have happened. And that hasn't just gone away because of the resurrection. Resurrection, as the saying goes, is not resuscitation. Things do not go back to the way they were before. The crucifixion is not undone. Jesus' wounds remain. *Something has been irreparably broken*.

For the people of God, that breaking is cause for grief, for pain, for bitter disappointment. And yet, *it is not the end of hope*. Jesus reminds the disciples of all the times when something was irreparably broken, and in the midst of that breaking, God did something new, something deeply good. The exodus. The parting of the Red Sea. The return from exile. And here, amid the shards and debris of the crucifixion, something is also broken open. God raises Jesus, breaking the hold of the power of sin, the power of empire, the power of death.

In the coronavirus crisis, *something fundamental has been broken*. There is the suffering of those who contract the virus, and the staggering death toll. There are the jobs lost; the savings evaporating. For essential workers, the weighing of options to make decisions that no one should ever have to make between income and safety, unemployment or leaving children home alone. Entrenched inequalities mean that Black Americans are getting sick and dying at alarmingly higher rates than whites. The most vulnerable have become even more vulnerable. Even for the most privileged among us, the losses are real: the disappointment of lost milestones, of graduations and long awaited vacations; the fast from Eucharist and community and human touch, the shattering of our sense of safety and agency and control. As a grief expert described, we are collectively grieving the loss of the world we knew. For many of our children, the loss of school, of contact with friends is the biggest lost they have ever experienced. We do not know what things will look like on the other side, or even when that will be. I wonder what story you are carrying about it. I wonder what story our children and youth are carrying.

Something fundamental has been broken. For a long time to come, we will be in the grief, whether that looks like denial or anger or sorrow. And, even in the midst of that, something has also been broken open. It has not been fun, or pretty, but already, we have experienced our own capacity for sudden and radical change, our ability to adapt, to make sacrifices to protect those who are vulnerable. *Something has been broken, but it is not the end of hope*. Jesus reminds the disciples and us that it is precisely in times like these that God has acted to do something new, something deeply good. I hope and pray that we will be right there with God, co-creating something that is not just deeply good but it is more just and gentle than what came before.

Hope, real hope, like its sister virtues of faith and love, does not always come easily. But in these days after the crucifixion, in these stories of the resurrection, Jesus keeps on showing up, drawing near, walking alongside, staying with, until our eyes are opened and we recognize him in the breaking, until we begin to feel our own hearts burn with the fire of that hope.