

“Palpable Grace,” a sermon based on John 20:19-31 (Easter 2A)

Preached by the Rev. Elizabeth Smith-Bartlett

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I.

I think this year was the first time that I really paid attention to Holy Saturday.

In my defense, us Presbyterians don't really do Holy Saturday--not in the way that our Catholic or Episcopal or Orthodox friends do at least. Maundy Thursday? Sure. A Good Friday tenebrae service to mark Jesus' crucifixion? Absolutely. We have to go to the cross before we can get to the empty tomb on Easter morning. It's one of my favorite services of the year.

Other traditions have this amazing Easter vigil service that happens in the dark of Saturday night. There are readings that span the Biblical witness, there's fire, there are baptisms and communion. It sounds long and beautiful and kinda weird, but really holy. I want to do this someday, I've decided.

But since us Presbyterians don't really do Easter vigil on Holy Saturday, I usually just skip over that part. Saturday becomes the day to make sure everything's ready for Easter. It's the day for running errands, or cleaning, or making Grandma's deviled eggs, or finishing whatever my parts are for the next day's worship.

In other words, I usually fill the waiting time with things to do...so I'm not really waiting anymore, I'm preparing for what's next...because I know how the story ends.

This was the first year that I really experienced the waiting. Don't get me wrong--there was still the last minute prep for Sunday worship--making sure my little corner here in the dining room was ready for primetime, grabbing fresh bread and juice for communion while wearing my mask and keeping my distance from the other shoppers. But the preparation didn't occupy the same space that it usually does.

Because Easter is the day that we shout out that death doesn't have the final word. Easter is the day that faith wins, hope wins, joy wins, love wins. And I know it in my head, but right now, in these pandemic days, I don't always know it in my heart.

So for the first time this year, I paid attention to Holy Saturday, because it feels like we're living in a Holy Saturday loop--a loop where one day's waiting blends into the next into the next into the next. A loop where it feels like we are collectively suspended between death and life, and we don't really know what's coming next, or how the story will end.

II.

And it struck me that the disciples were still there too.

Our reading from John picks up on the evening of Easter. Just three days before, they had gathered in the upper room to share a meal. Jesus had lovingly washed their feet, and instructed them to love one another as he had loved them. And then all hell broke loose, and they were afraid...afraid of who or what might be waiting for them outside. So they huddled together in fear, back in the upper room, but this time with the doors shut and bolted.

The disciples had been told by Mary Magdalene that Christ had risen like he promised, but they weren't there to see him for themselves. They know what Mary has told them in their heads, but they don't know it in their hearts. They don't believe it yet...they can't believe it yet.

They are still in Holy Saturday--suspended between death and life, waiting in fear and anxiety for what might happen next, locked behind closed doors because they don't know how the story will end.

They are still in Holy Saturday--and Jesus comes to them anyway. The locked doors don't keep Jesus out. Their fear doesn't keep Jesus away.

He shows them his wounded hands and side. He loves them so much that he gives them what they need in order to believe, offering them signs of palpable grace.

III.

Now for some reason, Thomas wasn't with them--we don't know why because John doesn't tell us. And when he finally arrives, we realize that he too is still in Holy Saturday, unable to believe that Jesus is risen until he has more than words to end his loop of waiting.

A week later, when Thomas is with the other disciples, Jesus appears to them all again. He offers Thomas what he needs to believe--he lets him touch those fleshy wounds--he gives Thomas signs of palpable grace.

Thomas gets a bad rap, in my opinion, and you've heard me defend him in years past because he asks for the same thing that Mary and the other disciples received--just a little bit of proof. Mary and the other disciples needed that before they could believe, and yet Thomas alone gets singled out. His only faux pax, if any, is that he's late. Tardy Thomas? Fine...but calling him Doubting Thomas for centuries just isn't fair.

This year, more than ever, I don't read this as the story of Doubting Thomas--I read this as the story of Relentless Jesus, who shows up again and again and again, doing whatever it takes for his disciples to recognize that he is with them, even now, even this way. It is the story of a persistent savior who offers us palpable grace in the midst of our fear, anxiety, and doubt.

IV.

There's a professor at Duke Divinity School named Kate Bowler who is quickly becoming a spiritual guide for me in this season of strange Holy Saturday waiting.

Kate studies the history of Christianity in North America, which has taken her in multiple research directions, one being the prosperity gospel--this idea that if we have enough faith and pray in just the right way, God will bless us with health and wealth and happiness, like a genie granting wishes.

Kate was also diagnosed with stage 4 cancer at the age of 35. The irony of this first became the subject of a Times op-ed and then her own published memoir called *Everything Happens for a Reason (and other lies I've loved)*.

Needless to say, Kate has done a lot of thinking and writing about faith in light of suffering and uncertainty, and she offers this strategy for such a time as this: when Kate was really sick, and there was no way to know how the story would end, thinking about the future indefinitely was just too daunting. But she found that if she could set a horizon point for a shorter span of time--for example, the amount of time between her scans--she could manage that. She could figure out a rhythm of life to get to the next scan...and then the next...and then the next.

It's like swinging from vine to vine over an abyss, she says--we need those intermediate points to help us get to the other side because it's just too much to try and do it all at once.¹

We started this pandemic journey during the season of Lent--the season of the church year when we are focused on our mortality and fragility. And as a colleague said on Facebook a couple of weeks ago, this was the Lentiest Lent that ever Lented.

But what about now? How do we make this journey in the season of Easter? And how do we make it as an Easter people who in many ways are stuck in Holy Saturday?

In the Biblical accounts, Jesus needed to appear to his followers over and over again in order for them to believe, in order for the good news of his resurrection and life's victory over

¹ Kate Bowler references are from her Instagram account (@katecbowler), as well as her website for this Easter season in the midst of a global pandemic (lifetogetherapart.com).

death to take root in their hearts. They couldn't just hear about resurrection...they needed to encounter and experience resurrection--palpable grace--and that took more than just the day of Easter. It brings me great comfort to know that the earliest Easter people needed more than one Easter experience for the good news to begin to stick.

So what if...

What if our way out of being stuck in Holy Saturday is to make this season of Easter our horizon point? We are a week into the season already, but it's not too late to start--the season of Easter is 50 days long in total, so there's still plenty of time to find some rhythm within it.

In these weeks between now and Pentecost on May 31st, when we are still unsure of how the story will end, as we are swinging from vine to vine over this abyss, we can choose to look for signs of hope, new life, and resurrection. We can practice loving our neighbors as ourselves. We can pay attention for signs of palpable grace. And in all these ways, we can make room in the midst of our fear and anxiety to feel the inbreaking of Easter in our lives and in our hearts, trusting that Jesus will keep showing up as many times as it takes.

V.

I'd like to end today on a personal note. This season of Easter is also my last season with LAC. News went out the same week that we were all making big decisions about how to respond to the covid-19 pandemic, and in some ways it got a little lost in the shuffle, understandably so. But I want to make sure that you know. And I want to make sure that in these final weeks, even as we must keep our physical distance, that we don't let that slip by.

Your emails and calls and texts in these weeks have been moments of palpable grace for me...and if I haven't responded to your message, I sincerely apologize. I waited to start responding to them so that I could savor them, so that they could really sink in and live here in my heart--and then everything changed so rapidly that I just haven't caught back up. But I promise that I will.

Unless something radically changes between now and then, my last Sunday will be Pentecost--May 31st--making this Easter season a horizon point in more ways than one.

And so it is my hope and prayer that these weeks are filled with signs of palpable grace, for you and for me, and that we can share them with one another, witnessing to the ways that even in the midst of all of this, nothing will ever separate us from the love of God.

Beloved, deep breaths, clean hands, open hearts...and be well. Amen.