

Lord God, who calms the troubled waters, we bless you for your presence in the midst of all our fears, all our trials, all our worries. We release to you the things we hold too tightly, and we trust your words of peace. Be among us in this hour and may we lean into your everlasting arms of love, secure that we are yours, now and always. ... May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing and of you, who are ROCK, REDEEMER, and COMFORTER of us all. Amen.

Our theme continues these next few weeks as UNRAVELING...seeking God when our plans fall apart. Each week we will spend time looking at our lives in partnership with a biblical narrative where God meets us in the spiraling, unraveling our plans and our lives... and weaving us into something new.

On Friday, September 11, our nation, and the world, paused to remember the day 19 years ago that the unimaginable happened. We remember the images of cerulean skies filled with smoke in New York City, in Washington, DC, and in a field in Pennsylvania. Many of us remember precisely where we were and what we were doing at 8:46am, 9:02am, 9:37am, & 10:03am, as 4 planes flew, hijacked with intention to ram into symbols of democracy & worldwide economic prosperity, and crashed causing death, fire, destruction. At 10:28am, 10:50am, and later at 5:20pm, the structural collapses of these symbolic buildings would provide additional insult to injury as the metal, cement and fire ravaged beams fell on first-responders, rescuers, good Samaritans, and spread pulverized dust particles that still impacts surviving bodies, families, and National memories across the world.

The unthinkable... the unimaginable... life unraveled in despair as we watched...as the world watched and ached, and parents, children, young and old, wondered what had happened...and pondered, how would life ever be the same?

I was serving as an Administrator in a public middle school, located in the MD suburbs just outside Washington DC. We had many teachers with family in NYC, students whose family were diplomats and were military and served downtown

and in the Pentagon. It was a beautiful day in which life as the world knew it was shattered and unraveled.

This scripture could not come at a more challenging time in our lives. Not only are we remembering a day of unraveled despair, but we are in the midst of challenges due to the COVID19 pandemic, protests for social justice, violence & rioting, historic wildfires, a record-setting hurricane season, and a pending national election. It is quite a year for unimaginable and unthinkable challenges. We are fearful, we are tired, we are frustrated, and we want our comfortable, predictable lives back! But life, as we have lived it, will not be the same. Normal life has been unraveled. We ponder, what on earth, Lord, are you doing?

The disciples, too, gathered together and locked behind doors, were in despair and disbelief at the unthinkable. First, their rabbi, teacher & friend, Jesus, had been betrayed by one of their own, arrested, put on trial with false charges, tortured, and executed by their own religious authorities and the Roman rulers. Now his body is not in the tomb AND there are reports that Jesus has appeared to Mary and others on the road to Emmaus. To say they are in shock with this trauma is an understatement, yet understandable.

And then, as Debra read for us today, Jesus appears to the disciples, not once, but twice behind the closed and locked doors... the first without Thomas, and then with Thomas present.

Let's go deeper into this narrative, as we do each week, asking: What's unraveling... what's being separated, sorted or untangled... what mystery is being revealed? How should this inform our lives?

Jesus' disciples are huddled in fear (clue: locked doors). So perhaps the first questions are, where's Thomas? Why isn't Thomas with them? Maybe he is so upset he can't bear to be with anyone...he's isolated himself. Maybe he is out getting food. We don't know. All we do know is Thomas is absent from the room when the unimaginable happens... Jesus appears.

It took a moment, but after Jesus spoke, he showed the scars on his hands, his side. Then, as we heard, 'when the disciples saw the Lord, they were filled with joy' (v20). Their fear unravels into joy! To be clear, this is the fulfillment of the

promise Jesus gave (16:20) earlier when he said, "Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy."

So when Thomas returns, they exclaim, as Mary did... 'We have seen the Lord'

And Thomas responds with his need to see, for himself, the unimaginable.

Thomas expresses his despair as skepticism. His absence... from the room, from God's presence in Christ, from the fellowship group gathered in ties that bind from common experience, fuels a heart that is crushed and broken. Thomas utters aloud his need to 'see', in a tangible way, what he cannot grasp.

Further, having missed out when Jesus appeared, I wonder if Thomas feels like an outsider, a bit left out and disconnected.

Eight days later, as Debbie read for us, Thomas is present when Jesus appears. Same pattern, the disciples are huddled behind locked doors. Yet after greeting the group, Jesus gives attention directly to Thomas... 'put your finger here', he says to Thomas. It is as if Jesus was present when Thomas spoke his need to the group eight days prior. Yet, Jesus knows his need, his despair, and unravels it into awe, revelation, and the profession of his faith, 'My Lord and my God!'

Before we move on, I want to bring your attention to the unraveling of this theological moment. Remember, God creates the cosmos in six days, rests on the seventh, and then, on the eighth day, creation unfurls. Jesus rises from the dead the day after the Sabbath, the eighth day. According to Mosaic law, circumcisions were to be performed on the eighth day (Lev. 12:3). In short, the eighth day symbolizes renewal, commissioning, and a new creation.

So, what is the significance for Thomas that Jesus appears to him eight days after the resurrection? Just as the disciples fear was unraveled into joy, Thomas, too, is unraveled into complete joy and communion with God through Christ.

And the words Jesus has for all of us are important... that for those who believe, new life is possible.

Remember, Thomas was the one who asked Jesus about the way... 'How can we know the way?' Thomas asked when Jesus said ... 'When I go to prepare a

place ...I will return...You know the way to the place I am going' (14:3-4).

Thomas knew the way all along. Karoline Lewis states it in this manner in an article in *Working Preacher*, 'You knew the way was not a claim meant to exclude others. You knew the way was not that which you could use to reject others. Instead you knew the way was being in the presence of your Lord and God—and that's all you wanted. You wanted what Jesus said you know. You asked for what Jesus said you should. You needed what Jesus said is yours—always. And in that moment you saw Jesus as your Lord and as your God. Wow. Thank you, Thomas, for your courage to ask."¹

So, 2020 has been quite a year for unimaginable and unthinkable challenges. We are fearful, we are tired, we are frustrated, and we want our comfortable, predictable lives back! But life, as we have lived it, will not be the same. 'Normal' has been unraveled. I know I am not alone to ponder, 'what on earth, Lord, are you doing?' just as the world, our nation, and soooo many families wondered on September 11, 2001. Yet here we are...collective survivors and inheritors of a way, when there seemed there was no imaginable way.

The good news from this biblical narrative that we must carry with us and share is this: we have only to ask, to believe, and we will be shown a way that is a peace unlike the world's peace. Jesus, each time he appeared said, Peace be with you. This peace is security, a tie that binds believers together in faith.

Isolation, disconnection is not the answer...community, in Christ and with one another, is the key to peace. As John Fawcett penned in 1782, *Blest be the ties that bind our hearts in Christian love; the fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above.*

So let us, as we continue to live into this challenging year, be safe and yet use the tools we have, email, text, phone calls, zoom, and hand written notes, to reach out as branches of the vine, to connect in community so that we remember the Way of peace in God's love.

And if you are one who prefers time alone, what I am certain of, is that God, in Jesus, with the Spirit, seeks to meet you where you are, and loves you beyond

¹ — *Courage to Ask.* Published on *Working Preacher*. April 5, 2015. <http://workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3580>.

measure. I love you...but God loves you sooo much more. May it be so. So be it.
Amen.

Go to Prayer of
Confession led by Liturgist

Lord's Prayer