

I. Advanced organizer

A. It was **my 30th birthday** and, as a young mother, the one thing I wanted for my special day was a little basic pampering: specifically, **the opportunity for a much overdue haircut**. I was a mother of only one child at the time (for those of you who don't know me, I now have three), and little Elliott (otherwise known now as the purple haired drummer) was just over a year old. Moms in the room - you probably remember those early years of parenting babies; there's not often a lot of time for self-care. It's hard to shower or go to the bathroom in private in those years of really littles, let alone to get a haircut.

1. And so for my 30th birthday, **my best friend volunteered to help make it happen**. We'd go together to the salon, have haircuts back to back, and while one of us was getting our hair cut, the other would hang out in the waiting area with toddler Elliott. Then afterwards we'd all go get some lunch together. Seemed like a brilliant plan. And it was, at first. My friend Janice kept Elliott happy and busy while I was rinsed, trimmed and blown out. It felt so great. And then I took over the baby-minding duties as Janice took her turn in the chair. Now little Elliott was still gaining confidence as a walker. He put his little hands on the coffee table in the waiting area and did laps around it with joy. Until something gave way in his feet. His balance teetered. Before I could reach out to grab him, I saw my little guy starting to fall headfirst. And as it so happened, his little head was right in line to catch the corner of the coffee table.
2. **Instantly, the serene spa setting was transformed** as screams emitted from his little body and gushes of blood poured forth from his forehead. The hostess quickly brought me a towel, but it was quickly soaked with blood. Blood was being smeared on the carpet, on the furniture, as my distressed toddler thrashed and wailed and his distressed mother desperately tried not to do the same.
3. **My friend Janice extracted herself from the chair**. Thankfully she'd been rinsed but not yet trimmed, so she was able to excuse herself without having to walk away with only part of a haircut. She drove the two of us with haste to the emergency room where we spent the rest of my birthday afternoon getting six stitches sewn in the forehead of my baby. Happy birthday to me.
4. Elliott's head of course healed and he was young enough that he doesn't remember the incident that gave him the mark he still wears on his forehead. But it is there for those who look close, a scar in the center of his brow, not unlike Harry Potter's, telling the story of his mom's birthday years ago when he was just a baby.

B. Well, **today is Easter Sunday**, a day that is the culmination of the Lenten journey many of us have taken over the last six weeks. It's the day that the Jesus-centered tradition we are connected to celebrates as our great source of joy. The day we celebrate that death does not need to be the end of the story. That Jesus died on Good Friday but rose on Sunday. The day we honor that there is life after loss. **There is what the Christian faith calls "resurrection."**

C. I speak this with the knowledge that **we as a society are living in a kind of resurrection moment**. This very gathering, you could say, is a kind of resurrection. This is **our first in-person Easter celebration since Covid**. The last two years, we celebrated the holiday at a distance, connecting only online.

1. Yet after those two disorienting virtual-only Easter gatherings, here we are again: **gathering in-person many of us**, with lively music, a substantial number of us here, and a party to enjoy after the service. We are embodying a bit of "life after loss" as we gather today. And this "life after loss" moment is just one in a series of moments that many of us are experiencing these days, as more and more offices call their workers back to their campuses, masks are being removed in more and more social settings, live entertainment

has returned with plays and concerts back on the books. This summer more events will likely take place than have taken place over the last couple of years, more of us will travel, we will likely continue to move further into this season of what comes after many of the most dramatic painful moments of the Covid pandemic.

2. **And yet. I'm not sure any of us who lived through life before March 2020 and are also living now believe that what we are moving into is simply a return to what came before.** The illusion that we could or would even want to simply pause life and return to it was shattered long ago, perhaps by June 2020. What we are living now is indeed some sort of life that has come after a season of great loss, but it is not a return to what was. It is something different. And this, to me, is what also resonates with this event we honor today - the event of resurrection.
 3. Truthfully I think **churches often have an annoying habit of reducing the Easter story down quite a bit.** Everything is distilled into victory. Yes, Good Friday was sad, Jesus was wrongfully convicted and brutally murdered but it's ok! He rose! It's all good! There's a happy ending and now we all get to live happily ever after! So praise the Lord and turn that frown upside down; he is risen indeed and we have nothing to be sad about. But is life after resurrection actually supposed to work that way?
 4. Perhaps some of us wondered **whether we should even come today.** Maybe we don't really identify with the fully celebratory, standing completely in victory mood. If that's you today, feeling a mix of feelings, feeling like things are more complicated than simple, I just want to assure you that the emotional space you're in completely belongs here. Personally, I think it's about as resurrection as it gets.
- D. So **where do I get this more complicated picture of resurrection from?** I think it comes from the stories that Jesus followers told themselves of the moments after he returned. Yes, of course there were places of surprise and deep joy and celebration, and there should be those moments for us too. But there were other experiences in the mix as well, and looking at a story that shows some of those other experiences I think might be helpful for us today as we encounter our own moment of life after loss and wonder what things might look like going forward.
- II. So with that in mind, I'll go ahead and read our story for today. We'll pick up our story not on Easter morning, but with an incident that took place, according to the book of John, later that day. We'll pick up our tale on the evening of the first Easter, as related in the gospel of John, chapter 20.
- A. **19 On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the disciples had gathered together and locked the doors of the place because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." 20 When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 So Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. Just as the Father has sent me, I also send you." 22 And after he said this, he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you retain anyone's sins, they are retained."**
- 24 Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 The other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he replied, "Unless I see the wounds from the nails in his hands, and put my finger into the wounds from the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will never believe it!"**
- 26 Eight days later the disciples were again together in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them**

and said, "Peace be with you!" 27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and examine my hands. Extend your hand and put it into my side. Do not continue in your unbelief, but believe." 28 Thomas replied to him, "My Lord and my God!"

- B. So as I've named in our setup, this is a story with a lot going on emotionally. There's joy, and celebration to be sure. But that's not all there is. There's also fear. There's skepticism. There's wonder. There's intimacy. But what I find most fascinating is what seems to be at the center of each of the encounters that people here have with the risen Jesus.
1. Let's start by looking at the first encounter, when Jesus appears to a group of his followers on Easter evening. The story begins in a place of fear, Jesus finds his friends huddling together in a locked room. **What were they so afraid of?**
 - a) John alludes to **Jewish authorities** when he references their fear. Perhaps they are unsure of what to make of the news of the day: that Jesus' body has gone missing. They themselves know they didn't move the body, which may lead them to wonder who did? **Could the same authorities who were threatened by Jesus now be hiding his body so as to frame them, and stir up more violent hostility aimed at Jesus' closest followers?**
 - b) Or should they believe the words of Mary Magdalene, who claims she encountered a Jesus who has somehow astonishingly come back to life? If what she said could possibly be believed, in addition to fearing those forces who brought about the death of Jesus, **they fear what Jesus himself might say to them.** Mary and the other women stayed till the end, weeping at the cross, attending to his broken body. Perhaps that is why he may have tenderly appeared to her. But what about these closest disciples, these men who had scattered when Jesus was arrested, hiding, abandoning him in his moment of need, just hours after he'd predicted his own betrayal? If he really had returned, what words might Jesus have for them and were they ready to hear them?
 - c) Encountering them, **Jesus seems to sense their fear**, which is likely why in this short passage three times he says "Peace be with you." But it isn't these words themselves that seem to bring peace. The story says after speaking these words he showed them his hands and feet. The fear gives way to wonder and joy. But it's not Jesus miraculously appearing in a locked room that brings the joy. It's not Jesus words of peace. It's an encounter with his scars that changes the mood. **When they see his scars they feel safe and they can take in what's happening. Why his scars?**
 2. **Thomas of course has his own interaction with the wounds of Jesus, one that is even more intimate.** Having missed the Easter evening dinner party, we get the sense that his friends' story is too much for him to accept. He's skeptical, and really, who can blame him? Why wouldn't he be wary of their story?
 3. Now this isn't the first time Thomas the disciple is featured in the Jesus story. **This is the same Thomas who earlier in the gospel showed keen awareness that death may have been the trajectory for Jesus**, and with him, Thomas and his other close friends. When Jesus is persuading them to accompany him back to the area of Jerusalem, where Jesus has recently narrowly escaped stoning, so that they can visit the family of Lazarus, who has just died, Thomas is the one to tell his friends, **"Let us go too, so that we may die with him."**
 - a) **Thomas seems to me to be an analytical guy**, one who doesn't jump to conclusions but examines the evidence and reasons things out. He saw the forces at play. He knew death was a possible, even likely, outcome as Jesus challenged entrenched authorities,

and he was willing to face that death himself. So the horrifying events of Good Friday would not have been a shock to Thomas. They were more likely **a painful validation of his own instinct, as well as an exposing of his own weakness in the face of trial.** Despite Thomas' intention to be a good accomplice, his bravado in the face of hypothetical oppression, when the moment came, he did not stand up and die with Jesus. He disappeared, like all the rest. He hid, and he had the privilege to do so, likely shrouded in the guilt that anticipating what was coming hadn't actually given him the strength to face it with Jesus.

b) So no, analytical Thomas can't take his friends at their words. The reality of what he foresaw coming painfully true is too fresh; he needs hard evidence, scars he can touch with his own hands, if he's going to believe that there is somehow illogically some life after the loss he has just experienced.

4. And Jesus meets him there. When Jesus encounters Thomas, **he does not call him out for abandoning him, nor does he chastise his lack of faith.** He speaks Peace to Thomas, and then he invites him to an intimate exploration of his hands and his side. "Reach out," Jesus says. **"Don't be shy. Put your fingers on my wounds. Don't just look with your eyes. Touch my scars, take them in, and believe."** In that moment, the analytical, skeptical, failed accomplice **Thomas is drawn from self-protection to worship.** "My Lord and my God" he proclaims. Not because of Jesus' words. But because of his encounter with the scars. Why?

C. So full disclosure - I'm currently a woman in her mid-40s. And I've been reflecting this week about how essentially **the last decade for me has been series of cycles of loss and life after loss, of death and resurrection.**

1. The first took place nearly ten years ago when I was living in Iowa City, training to be a lead pastor, finishing grad school and looking forward with anticipation and hope to the fulfilling of my next dream: beginning an alternative, radically inclusive faith community in Berkeley, California. And then in that last year before moving here it became clear that **the dream I had been nurturing and pursuing for more than a decade, to start this community as part of a community of churches I was connected to and dearly loved, was not meant to be.** The network of churches I was a part of made it clear that if the community I wanted to pastor was to be fully LGBTQ inclusive, we would not be welcome in their denomination. I felt heartbroken as the dream I had long nurtured and believed in seemed to die. Still, slowly, in the wake of that loss something rose in its place. Though we weren't connected to a formal network of communities, the Martens came to Berkeley anyway. Within a few months, a small group of folks also longing to be a part of a radically inclusive safe, diverse, Jesus-centered community began to gather in my living room. Weeks after that first gathering, we chose a name, launched a website, and invited more new friends into the journey. Over seven years later, and through more cycles of loss and renewal, here we are. **Haven's story is a resurrection story.**

2. Many of you know that nearly four years ago, within three months of each other, **two of the closest women in my life - my sister, and a best friend - both received very serious cancer diagnoses.** I spent the next year and a half descending with these two beloved women into the valley of the shadow of death that is cancer treatment. Each of them had their own story, their own journey, and as one of the core people for each of them, I experienced my own seasons of loss and grief. And yet, each has also moved into something after the most terrifying. They each are living in their own version of life after

loss, and with them, so am I. It is a different existence than it was before, with its own complicated fragility, but it too is a kind of resurrection.

3. **And then there have been the losses from the last two years of pandemic life.** Losses that are still being assessed, still becoming understood. As a society, I think it may take us decades if not longer to really understand the enormity of what has been lost. Of course there's the immense tragedy of the loss of life, compounded by the loss for many of more typical rituals of grief. But even for those of us who have not lost someone we know to Covid, there have been so many other losses. Losses of milestones, losses of community, losses of relationships. Story after story I read these days talk about the psychological impact of the pandemic on all of us, and how we will likely be carrying invisible wounds with us for a long time. **We may be resurrecting as a collective but many of us are aware that the losses of covid are still being felt in our bodies, in our marriages, in our relationships with our kids, in our friendships, in our jobs.** We may feel like we're here, like we've "survived" these last challenging years but **we're not ok.** All is not well. Loss is still felt. And this too, it strikes me, is part of resurrection.
- III. For me, the story of Jesus' death and resurrection is not the story many of us were once told. It's not the story of some wrathful patriarch taking out their violence and anger at humanity on their innocent son and then saying it's all ok because he rose. Truthfully, that is a pretty monstrous story and does not reflect the Divine heart I believe in or am connected to. No, when I think of the death and resurrection of Jesus, **I think of my young mother's heart the moment my baby was wounded.** I think of how deeply it undid me to see him hurt and how I longed for him to know that he was not alone; that his pain in that moment was not the defining experience of his life. If I could have bled with him, I would have. In the same way, I believe **there's a Mother's loving heart at the center of the universe who is moved on behalf of the pain of her children,** who longs to encounter us in the places of our deepest woundings and bring not only solace and comfort but the possibility of healing and transformation. She longs to show us, as she showed us in the transformed wounds of Jesus himself, that **our deepest sorrows need not defeat us.** That they can become something we can rightly call new life, new creation. **"Behold", the Divine Parent says, "I am making all things new."**
- A. **Jesus was not raised a blemish-free person.** Jesus' wounds were part of his resurrection body. They came forward into the new life he was initiating. He was forever marked by his experience of deep wounding. But those wounds did not have the final say. Something more powerful took place as sacred spiritual power came near and transformed that which was the locus of such tragedy and pain into something beautiful and redemptive. Something that connected him to others. Something that could bring hope and peace to those around him who had their own wounds in need of healing and redemption.
 1. You see **I believe Jesus' wounds weren't the only ones in the room that day.** He was not the only one to suffer trauma on Good Friday. The physical trauma of the event was not the only trauma suffered.
 2. Perhaps **this is why Thomas needed to see and touch the wounds** - seeing the marks of trauma on Jesus validated his own trauma as well. Maybe Jesus wasn't the only one in that encounter with scars. His were just the most visible. We don't always carry our scars on our bodies, but they mark us just the same.
 3. Still the good news of Easter - the good news of resurrection - is that **those markers don't have to be markers of shame or defeat.** They can be the signposts that testify to our transformation. Perhaps this is why each of Jesus' friends was so deeply moved when they saw Jesus' scars. The truth of the way that his wounding had been transformed into

something renewing, something not of death but of life, illuminated the possibility that each wound his friends had suffered watching him die, each wound they sustained seeing their dreams crushed, feeling the shame of their own complicity, **each of these wounds too might become a part of a bigger story that also brings life.**

4. In my own life, through my own experiences of death and resurrection, the cycles of loss and new life I have encountered have left me changed from the way I was before. Like Elliott's forehead, **I am marked by my encounters with loss.** These losses are fundamental parts of my story, but they did not defeat me and they do not define me in my resurrection life. My rejection from my church home has given me capacity to hold and make space for others who've been rejected. My encounters with the fragility of life have helped me become one who can stay present to this fragility wherever it surfaces. **I am living now in the hope that the still fresh wounds of these covid losses could one day be similar sources of life and strength as well.**
 5. Yes, **we are forever marked by the losses we've endured.** But if we allow it, these places of wounding can become the places where the Divine can most powerfully meet us. Our experiences of trauma and hurt will not and should not be erased but they can be transformed and become part of who we are becoming, just like Jesus' resurrection body. It's a body that is different, that carries unique and substantial new power, even as it also bears the marks of the losses that have come before.
- B. When Jesus' friends first encountered his wounds and their fear turned to joy, he did a unique thing. **He breathed the Divine Spirit into them and they could receive it.** A week later, when Thomas was invited to touch Jesus' scars, a similar power came over him. He was moved to worship. Both of them I think had a divine encounter with the gift that is at the heart of the Easter story and the reason we are called to celebrate, even in complexity: **the gift of hope.** Hope is a powerful force in the face of wounding and loss. Hope does not need to deny the painful reality our suffering speaks to. But **hope calls us forward to believe that suffering need not be the end.** Hope was found on Easter Sunday in the breath of the Divine breathed from the mouth of one resurrected person into that mouths of a community who also was in need of resurrection. And I believe **the same hope is available to each of us today too.**
1. Friends whatever your story, however well you feel like you're doing at this point in 2022, whether you are more in touch with feeling life right now or feeling loss, I believe **the Divine is here with the gift of hope ready to be breathed into you.** As we end, I want to extend the opportunity to receive it. We're going to do something a little different this morning. Normally at this point, as I end a teaching, we take about ten minutes for small group discussion around some of the things I brought up. And we are still going to do that, but before we do, I want to give us a moment to receive that same breath of life and hope and the presence of our Divine Parent here wanting to draw close to us in our places of pain and desolation. And we're going to do that now as we sing our next song. So I'd like to invite the band to come up and join me, and as I do I invite each of you to take a moment, close your eyes if you like, and call to mind one or two places of wounding or loss that you feel aware of today. I'm just inviting you to notice those places, to acknowledge what visible or invisible marks of loss you may be carrying today, and as you are open to it, I invite you to name those to your Divine parent who I believe is here, or to the risen Jesus who was present with Thomas, whichever you prefer. And as you name those things, and we sing this song, I invite you to **take in the truth that your pain is seen, that it is honored and that the Divine is committed to your transformation and**

the transformation of everything around you: your family, your friendships, your community and more. “Behold,” the Spirit of hope encourages. “I am making all things new.” May it be. Amen.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Share the story of a scar on your body, or a less visible scar, if you prefer. How has that scar become a part of your life after the wounding and healing?
2. What does it mean to you to encounter a God with wounds?
3. Where are places you have seen the Divine making “all things new”? In what areas do you need help hoping for that resurrection?