

God's Credentials

John 20:19-31

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I won't ever forget that day. It was one of those days of ministry that stays with you forever. But I was still caught off guard when Penelope's mom posted this past Friday on Facebook that the day was Penelope's birthday. She would have been seven years old this year. I find that hard to believe. Time has moved quickly for me, but probably not nearly as quickly for her parents.

I had been trying to do what I always do on Friday afternoons — write a sermon. But then I received one of those phone calls, one of those “get to the hospital now” type of phone calls. No time to tie up loose ends. No time to go home and put on the clergy collar. No time to really think about what you might encounter. The phone rang. I picked up. My church member said, “My baby was not breathing, and they took her to the ER. Please come.” So I went.

And when all was said and done, and she had been disconnected from all the machines, we all just sat there in the private family waiting room next to the ER. It was getting late in the afternoon. The room was hot and stuffy, normal weather for a Texas August. Penelope's parents were trying their best to keep it together and to fill out all the paperwork necessary for the medical examiner. Age: four months. Sex: Female. Date of birth: April 13, 2005. The rest of us — the big sister, the grandparent, a few friends, the hospital chaplain, and me — we all just sat in a state of heavy shock. Sweet, lovely, bubbly Penelope had died, and we had no answers.

Nothing about her death made sense. I had just baptized her eight weeks before, having very recently become their pastor. It had been her first day in daycare while her parents got back to a normal daily routine. Everything was the way it was supposed to be. But then, suddenly, on a hot August afternoon, we all found ourselves gathered in fear and disbelief behind the closed door of the family waiting room. And even though it was stuffy, no one went to open the door. It was almost like we thought if we could keep the door shut and stay huddled in there together, then we could avoid the reality of her death for a while longer. Only we also knew that tactic of avoidance was not going to work for very long. But we were going to try it for as long as we could.

And as we sat there, gathered behind the shut door in our fear and disbelief, we were all silent. No one knew what to say. There was nothing to say. No platitudes fit in that room. No “it was her time.” No “God needed another angel.” No “it must be God's will.” Nothing. For it was not her time and God did not need her as an angel and the God in whom I trust would never will the death of a child. We all sat there in silence because there was nothing to say. Her death made no sense. We had no words. And at some point, her mom or her dad simply cried softly, “My God why? This hurts.” And I got up to stand with them, to put my hands on their shoulders, but I still had no words.

What do you say? “I know”? Could I really say “I know how it hurts”? I could not say that. I had no idea what that felt like. I would leave the hospital that day to go home and to rock my 15-month-old son to sleep that night. I had no idea the pain

her parents were feeling. I just knew they were living my worst nightmare.

But the thing is, in a way, I wanted to know. I wanted to know that kind of hurt so that I could really stand with them in that space of brokenness and sharp pain and unrelenting grief. I was their pastor. I was their sister in Christ. I was their new friend. I had put the baptismal water on baby Penelope's head. I wanted to know. But I could not, and pretending that I could would have only caused more pain.

My friend Rev. Meg Peery McLaughlin puts it this way:

It is a conundrum, I think.

For when we pour out a painful story — a testimony of truth and torment, we don't want someone to say, "I know. I know exactly what that feels like."

Because it's my hurt, my story. Unique. Singular.

No one else can really know what it feels like.

Maybe you know what it feels like to lose a spouse, but you don't know what it feels like to lose my spouse.

Maybe you know what it feels like to look for a job, but you don't know what it means for me, for my family, for my finances, for my ego.

Maybe you know about cancer because you had a mastectomy, but you don't know my weariness and worry, you don't know my hot flashes and headaches. You don't know.¹

And yet, the conundrum comes because, at the same time, whenever we are in the place of such brokenness and sharp pain and unrelenting grief, we desperately want someone to know. We do want someone to put his/her arm around us and say, "I know." For it would be too much to bear if we were the only person experiencing that kind of broken-heartedness.² We need someone to know. We need someone to say, "I have had that same feeling. I have been in that same space of numb shock. I have locked myself behind closed doors in fear and disbelief, trying to avoid the reality of the pain. I know what it is to hurt like that." For that hurt would give them the credentials to listen. And we would not feel so alone.

I think that was some of what was going on with those disciples, including Thomas. They, in their grief and disbelief and fear, were behind locked doors as that first Easter day started to turn to dusk. The air in the upper room might have been stuffy and hot. I doubt they were talking about very much. They had no words. How do you speak of such disappointment? How do you speak of such grief and heartache? Not only had their friend been killed, there in public, in disgrace, in humiliation, but he had also been who they thought was The One. He was supposed to have been the Messiah. The Savior. God's Son. He was supposed to have been their hope. The fulfillment of God's promise. A herald of God's reign.

But within the span of one week, all of it had crashed down around them, and they were left in an upper room, full of grief and disbelief and fear, hiding behind locked doors in a last ditch attempt to avoid the reality that it was all over. And for whatever reason, Thomas decided to leave the room. Maybe he had needed to get some fresh air. Maybe he just could not stand to be around other people anymore and needed desperately to get some time alone so that he could weep and wail and cry out without everyone watching. So he left.

And then, a strange thing happened. In the middle of what felt to be that God-forsaken place, in the middle of the disciples' brokenness and sharp pain and unrelenting grief, John's Gospel reports that the risen Jesus came, stood among them, and wished them peace. And then, he did something for which I will be forever grateful. He showed them his wounds. He showed them his hands and his side. And we wonder why, not only why did Jesus think they needed to see his wounds — they had not asked, but why did he still have them in the first place. Biblical scholar Richard Hays writes: "Isn't it curious that God could raise Jesus from the dead but didn't heal the nail wounds in his hands? Was this an oversight? Surely not. The power of death is conquered, but the wounds remain"³

Why? Why did our risen Christ still bear the marks of his wounds? I think it was because God knew those wounds would serve as credentials for us. They would be Jesus' "I know" for us. For by still bearing the marks of his wounds, our risen Christ showed those first disciples, reminds us, that the God in whom we trust has taken that woundedness into God's very self. Those wounds testify to us that God literally understands, indeed knows first-hand, what it is like to be creature, to be us. The God in whom we trust literally understands what it feels like to be born into this world, to be completely and totally vulnerable and dependent on others.

The God in whom we trust literally understands what it feels like to have to grow up, to take on responsibility, to be an adult with all the stress and pressure that comes with it. The God in whom we trust literally understands what it feels like to have your heart broken by betrayal or to be angry when face to face with injustice or to deeply soak up the warmth of the love of good friends. And the God in whom we trust literally knows what it feels like to hurt, to suffer, to feel abandoned, to feel completely alone, and to die. As William Temple said, "The wounds of Christ are his credentials to the suffering race of humanity."⁴ They are our signs that Jesus, God with us, knows.

That must be at least some of what the disciples concluded too because as soon as they saw those wounds on their risen Savior, they rejoiced, received his peace, and breathed in his Spirit, which made them ready to be his body in the world. And later, that is all Thomas wanted too. For whatever reason, he had not been with them that day, for that indescribable moment. He had missed it.

But thank God Thomas was brave enough to say how that felt out loud. "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." In other words, unless I see his credentials that he really is the same Jesus who was born, who lived, who suffered, who was crucified, who was dead, and who was buried, unless I see those credentials, I will not buy the proposition that God was truly with us, one of us. Unless I can touch and see that Jesus really knows, then I will not believe that nothing can separate us from God's love. For the pain of this world is too great, and sometimes wilderness is all that one can see. Thank God Thomas was brave enough to give it words.

And then, later, John reports that Thomas finds himself standing before the Risen Christ. And in that moment, Jesus does not rebuke him. Jesus does not admonish him. Jesus does not shame him. They do not talk theology. They do not have a question and answer time. Instead, Jesus, the risen Christ, shows him the wounds. It is almost as if Jesus points to his hands and says, *Thomas, I know*. It is almost as if he points to his side and says, *Thomas, I know*.

And Thomas looks at his risen Lord still bearing his wounds, and then *he knows*⁵ and cannot stop himself from making a profession of faith, proclaiming, “My Lord and My God.” Thomas looks at Jesus’ wounds, the risen Christ’s credentials, and knows that there will never be a time when his pain, or the pain of another or the pain of creation will ever stand alone again. Thomas looks and knows there will never be a time when hurt or grief or powerlessness or pain or death will have the last word again. For God in Jesus *knows*.

And therefore, as a people who follow a wounded and risen Christ, as a people who, for generation upon generation, have been breathed upon, formed, and sent to be Christ’s living body in this world, while we cannot claim to fully know the suffering or the pain of another, we are given the courage and the command to stand with another as church in that suffering or pain. We are given the courage and the command to sit behind those locked doors, in those hot and stuffy rooms, in the middle of brokenness and sharp pain and unrelenting grief, not as one with an answer or an easy platitude, but simply as one committed to being a presence, as a sister or a brother in Christ, and as a living, breathing reminder that God is present in that place too and that, despite evidence or feelings to the contrary, they are not alone and never will be.

That is what happened with Penelope’s family on the day of her memorial service. Her family had only been members for a few months and had not been able to get to know many people since they had a new baby in the house. So they did not know who, if anyone, from their new church would show up for a memorial service. But, with courage and a deep sense of commitment, that congregation showed up in full force. And as Penelope’s mom, dad, and big sister came into the sanctuary, they saw pews filled with people they did not know yet, but people who were determined to have their backs, to be church for them, and to love them through the wilderness of their grief. And as that little family filed into their pew down front, by that congregation’s willingness to be present in that tough space, those church members proclaimed, “We cannot know your hurt. But God can. And God does. God knows.”

And God in Christ has the credentials, the wounds, to prove it. God knows. We are not alone, not even in our woundedness. Thanks be to God.

Notes

1 Meg Peery McLaughlin (paper presented at the annual meeting of The Well, Austin, Texas, May 2009).

2 Ibid.

3 Richard Hays, “Fingering the Evidence” *The Christian Century* (April 1, 1992).

4 Frances Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2007), 138.

5 McLaughlin.