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“Bless your heart!” **Sermon on John 20:19-31**

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John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors were locked where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “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.”

²⁶ A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” ²⁸ Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹ Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. ³¹ But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Where I grew up, “bless your heart” was a blessing of the soul. A reward for outstanding behavior, like being knighted by the queen. It did not take me long to discover that “bless your heart” down here in the south has an entirely different meaning.

I remember coming down south for the first time for an interview with a search committee. We were sitting on the deck of a barbecue restaurant on the banks of the Catawba river with dogwood and azalea in bloom, being wined and dined with the Associate Pastor Search Committee. No wine. In the glass that came to me was glucose in a glass, what you all call sweet tea. I about spit it across the table. “Would you bring him some unsweet tea? He’s not from around here. Bless his heart.”

I remember getting the job, and when assisting in my first funeral, I made the mistake of reading Psalm 23 from the New Revised Standard Version. God intended it to be read from the King James Version. It’s one of the Ten Commandments. “Thou shalt not read the 23rd Psalm from any version but that of King James.” “Bless his heart. They didn’t teach him everything up in Princeton.”

I remember when a few young moms had me go to the church library with them and pull the children’s books out of the Dewey decimal system, and group them together on the bottom shelf so that children could have access to them. Great idea! Until I was summoned to the library by Nettie Salthouse, who was the church librarian ever since the war broke out in since 1861. “Honey, bless your heart, you just need to learn a few things before you go changing everything!”

Well, now I know what you know. That during the early part of the 18th century, the words, “You idiot” were transported from New Jersey by mule into the Carolina colony. Where, before heading into Charleston the next day, the words “you idiot” were taken off the cart, rolled in a mixture of butter, flower and sugar, deep fat fried, sprinkled with powdered sugar, and served on lace doily. “Welcome to the South! Bless your heart.”

Mary Magdalene ran and told the disciples. “I have seen the Lord!” She’s singing the Hallelujah chorus and everything about her is trumpet and choir. She explodes into a room draped in black crepe and sadness, with a smile a mile wide. “I have seen the Lord.”

“Poor woman! Sometimes death can make people delusional. Bless her heart.”

I remember not long after my dad’s funeral, I was down in my garage, and my phone rang. It was my mother who said, “Donovan, your dad is sitting in his chair in the TV room. Do you think I should call the funeral home? This is most unusual.” And I replied, “Yes, mom, I do believe they overcharged us for services not rendered.” Not really. I said, “Mom, I think you’re dreaming it. It happens to widows and widowers.” “I guess so,” she said, “because when I go up to him, he disappears.” Grief. “Oh! Dear Mary, bless your heart!”

As far as I can tell, that's the problem with the resurrection. It draws a line and creates two sides.

"Bless their hearts! Why can't they see the sun shining?"

"Bless their hearts! Why are they dancing in the rain?"

"Why do they insist on wearing funeral black to a party? Bless their hearts."

"Who wears a smile and flowers at a funeral? Bless their hearts."

How about you? Where do you land? Do you believe Mary? Is your life trumpet and choir? Or is the hurt more believable? You just can't get to the resurrection, not after the pain that was inflicted on your soul. Easter says, "If anyone is in Christ, a new creation, the past is finished and gone, everything has become fresh and new." Do you rejoice in that? Or do you like to preserve the past - always carrying around some fear, some bitterness, some anger, in your heart, bless your heart?

The resurrection draws a line between good news and old news. And thanks be to God, Jesus crosses that line.

As we see in John's Gospel, it is not the power of positive thinking that saves the day. The resurrection doesn't hinge on Mary's ability to construct a well-thought out apology on why she believes in the resurrection and why you should, too. No. What saves the day, and all our days, is the power of God.

Able to break through that false security that continues to have everyone afraid, Jesus walks on in through the locked door.

Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there.
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I lock myself in a tomb, even there you will find me.

"Peace be with you!" It's the resurrected Lord. It's light! It's bright! It's amazing. And they don't see it. John says, "Jesus can show up and we wouldn't know it." Isn't that interesting? You could have Jesus right in front of you and you wouldn't know it. John says the only way to cross the line from disbelief to belief is through his wounds.

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, they try to persuade Thomas, who apparently, was at Vandy baseball game. But he missed the meeting, and no amount of peer pressure, no well thought out apology of faith could push him over the line. "Now Thomas, if you just think about why we are smiling, you'll get the resurrection. We have

seen the Lord! What's the matter with you? Bless your heart!" And Thomas said, "Unless I put my finger in his wounds..." He needs a savior to show up with wounds.

Last week I had a conversation in my assistant Terri's office with someone who was working on something at the church. And because I was there, the conversation was about God. That's what you do when a pastor comes into a room. Suddenly conversation becomes about the church and the Bible. Well, the conversation was about hell. And the person was trying to make sure that he wasn't going to hell. He said, he believed and recited all the things you need to say to get you out of hell. "I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. I believe he died for my sins." And yet, I could see he believed. I could see that he was touched by the love of God and yet he didn't trust the love of God. He was still very much in hell. Bless his heart.

I said to him, "How is your relationship with your parents?" I said that because I learned to trust love, to discover unconditional love through my parents. I have always believed that I could not fall out of love with my parents, and I think I must have said to myself, "God's love must be like that, if not even more." "How is your relationship with your parents?" He said, "I haven't spoken to my parents in 15 years."

There's a wound there. What do you think it is? "Haven't spoken to my parents in 15 years." I suspect that all of us have a wound of one kind or another. Something that keeps our hearts from rejoicing in Good News. Perhaps after three years of Covid and politics and war and storms, you're carrying some wounds. Friends are no longer friends. Walking on eggshells, which is no way to walk, bless your heart. I mean, not when Jesus has been raised from the dead! Walking wounded we are. Bless our hearts. Please!

Sometimes in a holy Word or some holy whisper of God, I find the wounds of a savior come to me and I'm able to rejoice, for I have seen the Lord and move on with life.

But, more times, when the wounds that are deep, I discover that the body of Christ comes to me, in someone like you. Someone who is making their way around this earth with wounds that are still there. And somehow, in the silence, there is life that looks like resurrection, and it comes to me... it finally comes to me... and blesses my heart.

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