

“The Victory Dance of Easter”

John 11:1-45

Second Sunday in Easter

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Christ the King Lutheran Church

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Peace be with you, from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.

It's a joy to be here with you at Christ the King this morning. As I just told the kids, I'm Pastor John's twin sister, so all week I was searching for a good, juicy story to tell about him...but I came up empty.

One thing I wanted to let you in on, though, about the Schwehn family that you might not know yet is that we love winning games; we're quite competitive with one another; and we so relish winning that when one of us wins a game, sometimes the joy is so...overpowering, that the winner will sometimes do a victory dance (like this). My father is really the king of the victory dance. I remember that at times at big Thanksgiving gatherings when my dad or his team would win a game, he would gather pots and spoons from the kitchen, and a procession of sorts took place from the kitchen to the living room and back, with some exultant shouts.

It feels good to win. Whether or not you do victory dances in your family, I bet you feel the same way... it seems pretty basic to being human, to love winning. And maybe this is one reason why we love Easter. Here we are, the Second Sunday of Easter, doing our own Christian victory dance of sorts. Shouting victory shouts of praise to God—Alleluia! Christ is risen! Everything's bigger—the music, the colors, the flowers, the banners. And this is all fitting because we are celebrating the good news that in Christ's resurrection we see that God's goodness wins over evil, God's love over hate, God's life over death.

It's all fitting...except. Except. Sometimes in the tone of our gatherings, in going big, in shouting loud, we can lose touch with how the good news of resurrection first broke into the world. We sort of gloss over how those early disciples first encountered the risen Jesus. The risen Jesus didn't come with a victory dance, with a victory march, exulting in his triumph. No. As one of my favorite theologians, Jean Vanier puts it, “The risen Jesus does not appear as the powerful one, but as the wounded and forgiving one.”

We hear in the gospel story this morning how the risen Jesus first appears to a small gathering of his disciples in this intimate way. He comes to a small, hushed, locked room. And he arrives still bearing his wounds, to meet them in their woundedness. Now here's a room full of people who are not feeling like winners. No. You better believe they feel like losers. They are afraid for their lives, in hiding; they have experienced trauma, and grief, and confusion. The risen Jesus comes to this intimate gathering

where fear and grief hang thick in the air, and he says, "Peace be with you." And he blesses them with the power of the Holy Spirit to go into the world to love as God loves—to forgive people and to proclaim peace to them.

And he doesn't stop there. The risen Jesus comes back a week later to make a special appearance to the one who is left out, the one who's feeling like the biggest loser of all, Thomas. He responds to Thomas's cry: "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" he says.

For Thomas, there is this deep desire to not only see but to touch the wounds of Jesus. And why is that? Is it just a desire for proof, as we usually read this story? Or might it also be the demand of a grieving friend and follower, who just wants to touch for himself, with tenderness, the place where this man he loved, this man of God, has been hurt by the world?

Jesus shows up, and he makes himself available. He invites Thomas to touch his wounds. And Thomas believes that Jesus is truly his Lord and God.

What might this mean, that the risen Jesus comes still bearing wounds and allows them to be touched? What might this mean, that in seeing and touching the wounds of Jesus, the disciples come to know that Jesus is indeed among them and raised?

Perhaps this risen Jesus is showing us with his wounds that our woundedness is the place where God meets us with peace and forgiving love. In the risen Jesus we see a God who knows what it's like to be wounded by the world, and this God shows us that we should not be afraid of touching our own wounds and the wounds of others and this world with love and grace.

This is a hard thing for us to do. If we're honest, most of us would admit that we have trouble confronting our own wounds and the wounds of the world. We have trouble confronting our failures to love, our mistakes, the sources of pain and brokenness in our lives. We have trouble confronting the ways we've been hurt and marginalized. Often we can even think that our own wounds disqualify us in some way, from love or forgiveness or community...we can sometimes think of ourselves or others as untouchable or invalidated because of our wounds. We'd rather be winning than wounded, right? We'd rather be having a victory dance.

But what if resurrection life means—having the courage to touch our own

wounds, and others' wounds, trusting that the risen life of Jesus meets us there with life—with forgiveness, love, compassion, tenderness? With “Peace be with you?” and with the power of the Holy Spirit that can actually transform and heal?

Last week I saw a Swedish film that came out a year or two ago called, “A Man Called Ove.” Ove is a 59-year-old widower who is a very grumpy man. He is a pain to his neighbors, grumbling about every little thing from peeing dogs to bikes parked in the wrong places. But pretty quickly we learn that Ove's grumpiness has a source in a wound that he keeps to himself. All he wants is for his miserable life to be over so that he can join his wife in the grave. Like the disciples in our gospel story, hiding behind locked doors, Ove, too, is closed off to community, to love, to the possibility of a future that could at all be hopeful.

But finally there is an opening for Ove. A family moves next door, and they start, well, disrupting his life. They try to depend on him for help. They are open with him about their messes and their need for love and community. Their disruptions, and their need for Ove...well they create a crack in the locked door of his heart...

And you spend some time watching the movie wondering whether that crack will widen for Ove. Finally, it does, when Ove dares to open up and share his own wound that he carries. With the mother of this family next door, a woman he has begun to trust, he shares the story of a terrible accident he and his wife had experienced and a tragic loss they both suffered in that accident.

And the story of this accident, this wound, which he thought on some level made him unloveable, unworthy, good for nothing but the grave, well, it's received. With love. His neighbor listens deeply and finally reaches out and takes Ove's hand. She touches this wounded man, and from this loving touch there is transformation in Ove. He is set free. He is set free to love, and be loved, to forgive and see himself forgiven. It's as if Jesus breathed the breath of the Holy Spirit on him.

Where are the wounded places in you, that seem untouchable? And—where are the wounded places in our world, that seem untouchable? That seem beyond peace, beyond forgiveness?

The risen Jesus points us right there, with his own wounded hands and side. To know ourselves as forgiven and loved, just as we are with our wounds. And to journey towards the wounds of the world, walking a way of peace and forgiveness by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Now today we have the joy of welcoming three new babies into the body of Christ—into this way of peace and forgiveness. One of them is my niece, Lydia—and also Cyrene and Greyson. I want these babies to know, that however the world may reward you or wound you in life, the identity you receive today is the most enduring and important one you will ever have: Child of God. It doesn't matter at all how much you win at life. Because there is a power way greater than winning at any of the world's games. And it's the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit that the risen Jesus breathed on his disciples—well, today that same Holy Spirit is blessing you, children of God, to be bearers of God's peace, and to be lovers with God's forgiving love that washes over you today. And nothing, nothing, can separate you from that love. No amount of locks on your doors or your hearts. No amount of wounds.

May you, baptized ones, and all of us, having been so washed in love and forgiveness ourselves, be blessed with good courage to reach out and touch the wounds of this world with the peace and forgiveness we know through Christ. Amen.