

## Evening On That Day

John 20:18-29

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When I was in Jerusalem last year, I had the opportunity to visit the Basilica of the Agony—also called the Church of All Nations. It sits right next to the Garden of Gethsemane on a hill overlooking one of the many graveyards that surround the city itself. It's a striking building; in comparison to the squat and ancient olive trees, the front has four bright columns topped by statues of each of the gospel writers. Above them is a large mosaic of grieving humans and angels surrounding Jesus as He kneels in supplication to an enthroned, golden God.

Even more striking, though, is the interior. The ceiling is deep blue and gold, studded with the emblems of the nations who donated to have the place built in the 1920s—hence the nickname. The windows that ring the large room are violet-dyed alabaster with small circles of blue and purple glass.<sup>1</sup> This means it is never fully daylight in that church; the sun never streams but rather trickles in slowly in indigo droplets that slink over the marbled floor. It is perpetually just before the sunrise, never fully day. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, the church is beautiful. It is the richness of an emperor's cloak, the wonder of the Northern Lights, the deep breath before stepping into a new unknown. It is, in its own sorrowful way, a much gentler holy place than some of the grand prismatic cathedrals whose ceilings reach for the heavens and remind you that you are not anywhere close to being the center of the universe.

“When it was evening on that day.” Last week we celebrated the wonder and triumph of Easter, but in the wheel of the Christian year Easter is a whole season rather than a day. We have 50 days to unpack this miracle called resurrection, which is great because it's very weird. Whether we have heard the story of Jesus' defeat of the grave once or one hundred times, part of our calling as people of faith is never to lose our intense wonder at such a story. Jesus was dead; really most sincerely dead, as the munchkins would say, and yet Mark tells us of an empty tomb and John gives a conversation with Mary and Someone so much more than a gardener. We who are old hats at the lilies and trumpets of Easter Sunday may have left worship last week for a delightful afternoon dinner and thought nothing more of the reality that yes, we are Christians, we worship on the resurrection day, but for the disciples, the pain-hope-marvel of it was still completely new.

“When it was evening on that day.” It is such a gift that John's account of Jesus' appearance to the disciples is *the very same day*. Mary had come running back with a tale of a risen Lord in the warmth of the dawn but here, not twenty hours later, the disciples are huddled in a locked room not in joy but in fear—fear of the Jews, John says, and we who live in an era of Christian nationalism need to remind ourselves that there is no place for us to read this as “the entirety of Jews.” John wrote in a time of religious factions vying for the definition of themselves, a time of knowing that claiming the same faith name does not mean carrying the same values. Our tongues are saturated with the phrase “not like *those* Christians,” so we can easily recognize John's tale of these very Jewish disciples fearing the wrath of their fellow faithful. There is no footing to read anti-Semitism into this tale of hope.

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<sup>1</sup> Descriptions are from my own photographs; details of construction and timing are from the [Church of All Nations - Wikipedia](#) page.

“When it was evening;” the disciples have the news of the resurrection and yet they are still afraid, these disciples who seem to keep running at the first sign of any danger. They abandoned Jesus in the garden, abandoned Him at the cross, and now they have abandoned even the possibility of Him in the graveyard; what terrible disciples they are!

And yet. “When it was evening on that day... Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’” He gives them the Holy Spirit—a much different gift than the one we usually celebrate in Acts on Pentecost—and the ability to forgive sins. He invites them into ministry, these fearful and fickle disciples, and says *peace, grace, love*. Like the strangely purpled light of the basilica, Jesus’ arrival on the very day of His resurrection is soft enough to reassure and renew the people with whom He entrusts such an incredible story while also being strange enough to call them to pay attention.

“But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.”

I can’t even imagine how heartbreaking and infuriating it must have been for Thomas to return from whatever his errand was and realize that not only had he missed the risen Christ at the graveyard with the Marys but now a second time at the room with everyone else. He is the lone outsider, now; he is the one who does not have the Spirit, who does not have the reassurance, who does not have anything but the promises of his friends and the memory of a cross jutting up into a sunless sky. It is absolutely unsurprising that his response is anger fueled by grief—“give me the physical body, the feeling of Him against my fingertips, or I won’t believe.” Professor Jaime Clark-Soles translates it as “I absolutely will not believe,” leaning into the emphatic negative that holds up the verb in the Greek. Thomas digs in his heels and demands that Jesus return for him, too; that Jesus love him, too.<sup>2</sup>

Have you ever needed proof of God, Church? Have you ever listened to a friend talk about how their prayers were answered, their loved one’s illness healed, their financial situation stabilized, their own uncertainty in their faith answered by an airy cathedral and a mountaintop experience and been furious that it wasn’t yours? I would be a liar and a terrible pastor if I said I hadn’t; I know exactly where Thomas and his jealousy are. I know in my bones what it’s like to feel like Jesus’ reassurance was for everyone but me. We call him Doubting Thomas but he, too, lived in the evening of that day; unlike the others, though, he would meet the next sunrise with nothing more than a wild story and an empty tomb.

And then another sunrise. And another. A whole week of them, waiting. I can only imagine how exhausting that week must have been—how many times the disciples would have had to remind and encourage each other in their fear and grief and joy, how each relieved smile they shared would have twisted the knife deeper into Thomas’ heart. A full week of being on the outside but belonging nowhere else; a full week of wondering if Jesus was ever going to come back or if the morning and evening of that day were the end of it, the quota of appearances.

Once again, Jesus arrives. “Peace be with you,” He says again. “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.’”

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<sup>2</sup> [Commentary on John 20:19-31 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) 2017

It is beyond gruesome that Jesus invites Thomas to stick his hands into Jesus' wounds, but He knows Thomas needs it. Resurrection is lovely but death is familiar; pain is a known quantity, scars a recognizable companion. Thomas is not ready for the sunlit cathedral because he is still in the twilight basilica, still seeing not his friend and teacher but the blood on the ground, the tears in the moonlit garden. Only the breath expanding the ribs under the hole in Jesus' side is intense enough for Thomas to overwrite the stillness of a chest caved in on itself against the wood of the cross.

“Good news does not erase fear,” writes Professor Joy Moore. “Good news, incredible news, can ignite hope, but even hope does not eliminate genuine fear... What does the resurrection mean? It means God still shows up... The wonder of this moment is Jesus' willingness to meet Thomas exactly where Thomas names he needs meeting... Jesus appears, nail scars and all. His offering of peace is followed by a demonstration of forgiveness—no condemnation for Thomas' request—a simple invitation. The disciples rejoiced, but Thomas' response is praise. There is a difference.”<sup>3</sup>

“My Lord and my God!” breathes Thomas. Does he reach out to take Jesus up on His offer to touch? Maybe; the text doesn't say. But the fact that Jesus offered it—offered His body that had already had so many hands on it, had already been so badly torn apart by Rome's cruelty and his friends' betrayals, just as He offered His body at a supper several days and a lifetime before that we remember in our own echoes, is incredible. It is meeting Thomas in the twilight sanctuary because dawn is too much and never once shaming him for that. It is recognizing that Thomas wanted—that we all want—to be included in the promise and loving him through it. It is God's kindness, in the truest sense of the word, in coming to Thomas with the very physical reality that this is a living being, that the cross is not the end of the story.

But such reassurance is not without redirection, because Jesus is kind but He's not spineless. “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.’” That's us, Church; blessed are we who live in the purple-patterned basilicas and the shadows of angel statues. Blessed are we who are learning to undo centuries of a whitewashed Jesus because we have not seen but have confused power with holiness. Blessed are we who have gone to one or one hundred Easter services and get up the next week to go again even if it's the last thing we want to do. Blessed are we who have yet believed not because we are better, stronger, or holier than Thomas and the disciples but because we have accepted the invitation to refuse hiding behind a locked door. Blessed are we who keep coming back to the impossible and glorious story of a God Who loves gently, fiercely, wholly, even and especially on the days when such a faith is not lilies and dawn but gaping wounds in the amethyst sunset.

Happy Easter, Church. It's a season; it's a faith statement; it's a theological foundation; it's a God Who never, ever walks away. Perhaps it is evening for you, and the morning seems like a dream you cannot believe—but do not think that this is something for everyone but you. Resurrection is a strange and mysterious thing; yet we gather here, in this season, with words that are thousands of years old to say *the Lord is with you; and also with you*. Let it be true. Let it be overwhelming. Let us believe, even when we have not seen. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> [Commentary on John 20:19-31 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) 2019