

John 20:19-31 – Easter II, Year A

One of my Lenten disciplines this year was finishing a few of the books that have been on my shelf for a while. So, during Holy Week this year, I decided to read *How We Learn to Be Brave*, by the Rt. Rev. Mariann Budde, the current bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington. Her central premise in this book is that bravery and courage are not always things we are intrinsically good at; that being brave, being courageous is something we can learn and cultivate. Through trust in God and by perseverance and practice, Bishop Budde believes faithful people can learn to *choose* to be brave and courageous, even when we don't feel particularly brave, even and especially when we are scared, anxious, or overwhelmed. She uses a variety of examples and short stories of notable people who've been faced with difficult decisions and who chose bravery, people like Martin Luther King, Jr., Jonathan Daniels, and Pauli Murray. These people, she claims, weren't merely born brave, but made the courageous choice, again and again, throughout their lives, to keep choosing bravery, to keep believing that what they were fighting for was worth their bravery, to keep believing that a more just world was possible so long as they had the courage to keep doing even the smallest part to bring that world into being.

This book came to me at the perfect time. Holy Week is always stressful and busy, with lots of services and moving parts. This Holy Week had the added backdrop of a particularly chaotic and heavy time period. We're living through a time of deep division and mistrust in each and in the institutions we create and rely on. There is so much vitriol aimed at people we don't agree with or flat out don't like. There is an ongoing war, and economic, political, and social difficulty and disorder. This is, of course, far from the first Holy Week to take place in a time

where hurt and suffering and pain are particularly close to the surface, and, though I hope we can change, I very much doubt this will be the last Holy Week to take place in such circumstances.

With all of that floating in the background, Bishop Budde's book resonated quite poignantly with me. It is times such as these, when hope can feel hard to hold on to, when culture can seem to reward anger and selfishness, when division and hate seem to get the upper hand, that making the intentional decision to choose to be brave and courageous matters the very most.

In today's Gospel reading, we hear the story of that first fateful Easter night, over two millennia ago. The disciples, fearful and anxious, are together in a locked room, afraid of the same religious and political authority figures who have already cost Jesus his life. Even though the women who visited the tomb earlier that morning have already delivered the Good News of Easter to the disciples, they are still too afraid to celebrate. It is into the environment of fear and trepidation that Jesus enters. His first words to the scared disciples are words of peace and joy. He meets their fear with reassurance and hope, love and purpose.

In John's Gospel, the day of Easter and the day of Pentecost are one. Jesus rises from the dead, visits the disciples, and then gives them their new assignment: go, preach, teach, heal, and reconcile the world, just as Jesus has done. He gives them the gift of the Holy Spirit, whose presence will strengthen them for mission and support and encourage them when times get tough, which we certainly know they will. This is a big night for the disciples, those first few followers of Christ. They have seen the Lord risen, healthy, and whole. They receive their new commission, to keep spreading the Gospel of Jesus and the love of God that underpins all of it. And they received the precious gift of the Holy Spirit to sustain them in the work ahead. All of this happens in the span of just one evening!

The problem, of course, is that not all the disciples were there to hear and receive this amazing news. Poor Thomas was not among that group the night when their lives and the world was changed irrevocably. The disciples, of course, tell Thomas the news, that they have seen the risen Jesus and have been sent forth in his name. But Thomas, much like the disciples who first heard the Good News from the women who met Jesus at the tomb, has a hard time believing what he hears. His doubt becomes his main characteristic, the thing he will be known for for centuries to come.

I don't think it's not hard for us to understand why Thomas might have a difficult time believing such good news. Think of all the things he's gone through in such a short time. His teacher, mentor, and friend, the person he sincerely believed was the Messiah, has been taken from him, betrayed by a fellow disciple and turned over to be mocked, beaten, paraded through the streets, and eventually killed. He's seen this ministry that I'm sure he genuinely believed would change the world come to what he believes is a horrible, violent, gruesome end. He is surely lost, heartbroken, and scared, surely guilty over his own abandonment of Jesus when all the disciples flee into hiding, leaving the women alone to weep at the foot of the cross. This isn't just disappointment. This is devastation. No wonder poor Thomas has a hard time hearing Good News again. His world has fallen apart, and with it, seemingly, his ability to hope.

Jesus, for his part, doesn't seem too concerned with Thomas' doubt. He instead lovingly meets Thomas where he is, showing him his hands and his wounded side, gently inviting him back into faith, back into hope, back into relationship. One of the commentaries I read this week put it so well: Easter is about Hope and Promise, not judgement and reprimand. Jesus has died

and has risen to bring people closer to God, not drive them further away, and Thomas becomes the first lovely example of this.

This is the Good News of Easter, not just that love and light and joy and hope blossom in a perfect world, but that they are planted, take root, and grow in our very much imperfect one. It is to people like the Marys at the tomb, like the disciples in that locked room, like Thomas himself, people hurting, weeping, fearful, broken, and doubting, who hear the story of Easter first. Jesus' triumph over sin and death is good news always, but it shines especially to those who find themselves in suffering, in pain, and the throes of an imperfect life in an imperfect world. When we find ourselves in those spaces, that's when we need the news of Easter most, that God has promised that good things are coming, that joy and peace and life will return to us.

As I read the Gospel lesson earlier this week, I could not help but think about the role of courage and bravery in all this, and Bishop Mariann's insistence that we can learn with practice and patience and intentionality to be brave. It takes bravery to believe that good things are still possible even when it seems like the bad is winning. It takes bravery to look for the light especially when we are in the midst of dark times. It takes bravery to believe that with God all things are possible—hope after despair, joy after suffering, even life after death. It takes courage to continue being part of that work with God, to hear not only God's promise of what the world could be, but to listen to God's call to us to be part of that work now. The Bible is full of people who have the courage to say yes, but also the courage to believe that the world that God is still creating and renewing and redeeming is possible and that we can co-labor with God to bring it into being.