



When Grief Keeps You Away

John 20:19-31

Sunday, April 23rd, 2017 - Second Sunday in Easter

First Federated Church, Peoria, Illinois

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Twelve seconds of silence is very awkward.

It is infinity on a telecast or broadcast. You begin to think that the station has gone off of the air. Yet twelve seconds of silence is exactly what occurred a few weeks ago when Egypt's "Walter Cronkite" heard an interview with the widow of Naseem Faheem.

The interview took place in a small, simple home, surrounded by her children in the ancient recreational port city of Alexandria. Naseem Faheem was the Coptic Christian guard who stood outside at St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral on Palm Sunday. He directed a "worshiper" to the metal detectors on the perimeter of the church grounds. The "worshiper" was a suicide bomber. He detonated his bomb killing himself and Faheem. Faheem's action, though, saved many, many others.

"I'm not angry at the one who did this," Faheem's widow said. "I'm telling him, 'May God forgive you, and we also forgive you. Believe me, we forgive you.'"

The television newscaster watching this report was stunned into 12 seconds of silence before he began to stammer about how the Coptic Christians have been persecuted for centuries. Finally he said, "How great is this forgiveness you have!" And then, with his voice cracking, added, "If it were my father, I could never say this. But this is their faith and religious conviction."

As my wife and I took an Earth Day walk through Forest Park yesterday we talked about our sermons for today. We are both preaching on the Gospel lesson. It is one that occurs each year on the first Sunday after Easter.

It has been a favorite text of mine, especially for confirmation Sunday. Today is known as "low Sunday." It is the first Sunday after Easter when attendance is among the highest as visitors and members and out of town family members gather for worship. The

Sunday after Easter is historically low. In every other church that I have served I had confirmation Sunday on the first Sunday after Easter. There is both a theological and practical reason for this. Theologically it makes sense as in the early Church new members were brought into active membership at the Easter vigil service. This tradition is still observed in Roman Catholic and Anglican congregations. So, the first Sunday after Easter is my Protestant way of trying to honor this tradition.

The practical reason is that by having confirmation Sunday we avoid “low Sunday” as grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins and friends go to church to see their loved one confirmed into Church membership.

As you know, I do not like the moniker “Doubting Thomas.” No one should be remembered by the last thing that they did. Earlier in John’s gospel, when Jesus was determined to return to Jerusalem and certain death, it was Thomas alone who turned to the other disciples and said, “Let us go with Him that we, too, might die!” In that instance he was “Courageous Thomas”. And then, in John 14, the last night that Jesus was with His disciples, it was Thomas who asked the question that was on all of the disciples’ mind; where Jesus was going and how would they know the Way. At this point he was “Inquisitive Thomas”.

But, since he is seemingly forever known as “doubting Thomas,” when this text occurs I tell confirmands and other worshipers that doubt is the seedbed of faith. If you don’t have moments of doubt, your faith is not growing. It is like you packed it in the freezer of your spiritual life and when life’s hard knocks come - as they always do - you take it out of the freezer and discover that it is freezer burned. It doesn’t taste right.

I also remind worshipers that doubt did not keep Thomas away from the disciples, the community of faith. In spite of his doubt, he returned to that upper room, to the fellowship. And, at times, I have explored verse 31 of the lesson. I talk about what it means to have life in Christ. It begins with a sense of Peace and ends with the charge that Jesus gave; “Just as the Father sent Me, so I send you into the world.” We are the body of Christ, doing the work of Christ, for the glory of God.

Yesterday, on Earth Day, my wife and I walked the Lower Deer Run in Forest Park. As we walked along we talked about the sermons that we would be preaching the next day. She was taking an approach that I had never thought of before; she wondered why Thomas wasn’t with the others on that first night. She wondered if it was because of grief. I never thought of that before, as I said, but it made sense. I reminded her of people that we had both known in our years of ministry; people who couldn’t stand to be in the

sanctuary because it was too painful. They couldn't shake the image of the casket of their loved one. Some who couldn't stand to hear the pipe organ or a certain hymn because it was played or sung at a funeral. Others who didn't want the 23rd Psalm read because of the painful memories that it harbored.

In my own life I know that unexpected loss and grief can shake the very foundations of what we believe. Like a spiritual GPS there is a voice in our soul saying, "Recalculating, Recalculating"! Eventually, we regain our bearings, if we don't quit.

Grief is hard. It is hard to pick up your life and put one foot in front of another. It is hard for others, too, for they do not know what to say. But it is also important for us to "Travel in the direction of our fear," as John Berryman once said.

Sheryl Sandberg knows what that is like. If her name is familiar it may be because she is a colleague of Mark Zuckerberg. She also wrote a best-selling book entitled *Lean In*. But in May of 2015, while on vacation celebrating her husband's 47 birthday, he collapsed and died. She battled and battles to put her life back together. Her rabbi advised her to "lean into the suck." Out of and in the midst of her experience she wrote *Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy*. A month after the death she wrote on her Facebook page:

"I think when tragedy occurs, it presents a choice; you can give in to the void, the emptiness that fills your heart, your lungs, constricts your ability to think or even breathe. Or you can try to find meaning. These past 30 days, I have spent many of my moments lost in the void."

I wonder if Thomas was not with the 12 because he was lost in the void of grief. And, yet, in today's lesson, he is back in the community, in the upper room. In her book Sandberg gives some very practical down to earth advice to those of us who stand outside of another person's grief.

Don't avoid the heartbroken - except when they obviously want to be avoided.

Don't tell them that everything will be O.K. because how would you know?

And don't ask how they are. Instead, ask them how they are doing today.

Not too long ago a colleague of hers' was diagnosed with cancer. She responded to things differently. "I told her," she wrote in her book Option B, "I know you don't know yet what will happen - and neither do I. But you won't go through this alone. I will be there with you every step of the way."

Thomas was back in the community. Don't know what the disciples said but maybe they said that they, too, were in pain, trying to put their lives back together. But, when they were together they experienced the Risen Lord. And that is all that we really know; it is in community that Thomas, and us, discover the Presence of the Risen Lord.

To God be the glory. Amen.