

Kirby Lawrence Hill
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1 Peter 1:3-9
John 20:19-31

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

A LIVING HOPE

Oh, to be a fly on the wall of the house where the disciples were that first Easter evening. What do you think might have been the nature of their conversation? Mary Magdalene had told them the amazing news that she had seen the risen Lord earlier that morning. Others had gone to the tomb and had confirmed that it was empty except for the linen wrappings lying there which had covered Jesus' body. Mary was elsewhere that evening. Those who had followed Jesus must have gone over her story repeatedly, with at least some of them wondering whether she might have suffered a mental breakdown. And yet the tomb was empty. If Jesus had been raised, where was he? Certainly, they had asked her how he had looked. Mary had told them that she didn't recognize him at first, but she admitted she had been crying at the time. Could she, who had been a close follower, have mistaken Jesus for someone else? If it was someone other than Jesus whom she had seen, then where had their Lord's body been taken and why were the grave clothes still there? Their heads and their hearts must have been reeling.

I wonder if this was the first time the disciples had been back together since they had scattered after Jesus' arrest. Would Peter have talked to the others about his triple denial of knowing Jesus? Would the others have expressed regret about not standing with their Lord when things moved toward his execution? None of the gospel accounts give us details about such conversations at this critical time.

What the Gospel of John does tell us is that on that Sunday evening, they were together in a house with the doors locked out of fear that they might be vulnerable as those who could be identified as being Jesus' followers. They were huddled in fear – but then somehow, Jesus was standing in their midst telling them, "Peace be with you." They needed that peace – the previous three days had in all likelihood been the most traumatic time in their lives. And then to be encountered by someone whom they had abandoned, to be encountered by someone who had been killed – yes, they needed peace to be with them. They needed Jesus' peace to be with them. But there must have been something on their faces indicating that they couldn't believe it was really him, for then Jesus shows them the crucifixion wounds in his hands and side. It seems like they might feel worse seeing these wounds, feeling all the more guilty that they had abandoned him, and realizing that being his followers could indeed be costly. What they saw would not be forgotten. And yet, it was only at this point of seeing Jesus' wounds that their fear was transformed into joy. Why would this be what would change their emotions from fear to joy?

For some reason, Thomas, one of the disciples, wasn't there that night. Perhaps he was less frightened than had been the others and felt less need to be behind locked doors. On their way to Jerusalem, he had expressed his willingness to die with Jesus. The other disciples told Thomas the same thing that Mary Magdalene had told them – they had seen the Lord. They must have also told him every detail about their time with Jesus that evening, including that they had seen his wounded hands and side. Thomas told them that he not only wanted to see Jesus, but to also touch him at the place of his woundedness.

In 1994, a South African named Kevin Carter won the Pulitzer prize for photojournalism. He had extensive experience in difficult situations, but it was while he was in famine-stricken Sudan that Carter saw a small, emaciated toddler struggling to make her way to an emergency food station. When she stopped to rest, a vulture landed nearby with its eyes on the little girl. The photo of the starving child being stalked by a vulture is what won him the prize. Carter had been among the journalists told not to touch famine victims because of the possibility of the spread of disease. So after he took his photo, he chased the vulture away, but did nothing more. When the powerful photo was printed, there were all kinds of inquiries as to what had happened to the child and Carter did not know. His photos in Sudan and elsewhere had made a difference in helping the world to know the plight of suffering people in a number of settings. But Kevin Carter did not get directly involved with those whom he photographed, he did not reach out and touch them, and he expressed great regret about that. Three months after he won his Pulitzer Prize, Carter committed suicide. That one encounter with a starving child was not the sole cause of Carter's despair, but his suicide note included this statement: "I'm really, really sorry. The pain of life overrides the joy to the point that joy does not exist." ¹

I will not pretend that there are not Christians who struggle with depression and even those who contemplate or commit suicide. However, our resurrected Lord is indication that the pain of life and even the pain of death do not have to override our joy. It was as Jesus' followers saw his painful wounds that they were able to put aside their fears and rejoice in his life. Jesus appeared again when Thomas was with the other followers who were behind doors that were shut. Once again, Jesus said, "Peace be with you." And then, knowing what Thomas had said he needed, our Lord offered him permission to touch his wounds. And Thomas responded saying, "My Lord and my God."

This was the confirmation needed that the one who had been crucified was once again with them. And the one who had suffered on their behalf offered them not only his wounded hands and side, but also his peace. He had forgiven them, and upon empowering them with the very Spirit of God, he was sending them out to share the peace and forgiveness of Christ that they had been given. They had assurance in their risen Lord that whatever the world might inflict upon them did not have the power to undo them. They too had been wounded by his death, but now their hope that had died had come back to life and was stronger than ever. They did not have to be afraid of seeing and touching the places of pain and suffering in their own lives or in the lives of others. They could unlock the doors. The pain of life and death would not override the joy they had been given.

You and I have not directly seen our risen Lord, but we have been empowered by his Spirit with hope and love to look upon and to touch our own woundedness and to minister to the wounds that others have. There are those who are frightened to do so, but we do not have to cower in fear. We can engage the world even in its place of greatest suffering and need. For there is a living hope and joy that, God can overcome even that which wounds and kills. We celebrate the resurrection every time we reach out to others in a healing way in the name of Christ. With the peace of Christ and a living hope, we don't lock the doors of our gathering place or of our hearts.

¹ <http://www.fanpop.com/clubs/photography/articles/2845/title/kevin-carter-consequences-photojournalism>