

Sermon from John 20:24-28
Given Sunday, May 29, 2022
for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville
Reverend Erika Marksbury, Senior Pastor

It happened that one of the Twelve - Thomas, nicknamed "Twin" - was absent when Jesus came. The other disciples kept telling him, "We've seen Jesus!"

Thomas' answer was, "I'll never believe it without putting my finger into the nail marks and my hand into the spear wound."

On the eighth day, the disciples were once more in the room, and this time Thomas was with them. Despite the locked doors, Jesus came and stood before them, saying, "Peace be with you."

Then, to Thomas, Jesus said, "Take your finger and examine my hands. Put your hand into my side. Don't persist in your unbelief, but believe!"

Thomas said in response, "My Savior and my God!"

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The Onion, which is, by its own proclamation, "America's Finest News Source," ran a headline this week: 'No Way to Prevent This,' Says Only Nation Where This Happens Regularly. It's the first headline on their homepage. And what followed was a news story out of Uvalde that reads like this:

In the hours following a violent rampage in Texas in which a lone attacker killed at least 21 individuals and injured several others, citizens living in the only country where this kind of mass killing routinely occurs reportedly concluded Tuesday that there was no way to prevent the massacre from taking place.

“This was a terrible tragedy, but sometimes these things just happen and there’s nothing anyone can do to stop them,” said Idaho resident Kathy Miller, echoing sentiments expressed by tens of millions of individuals who reside in a nation where over half of the world’s deadliest mass shootings have occurred in the past 50 years and whose citizens are 20 times more likely to die of gun violence than those of other developed nations. “It’s a shame, but what can we do? There really wasn’t anything that was going to keep this individual from snapping and killing a lot of people if that’s what they really wanted.”

At press time, residents of the only economically advanced nation in the world where roughly two mass shootings have occurred every month for the past eight years were referring to themselves and their situation as “helpless.”

The Onion is satire, except when it's not.

The second headline on the homepage reads: 'No Way to Prevent This,' Says Only Nation Where This Happens Regularly. It's a story out of Indianapolis.

The third headline on the homepage reads: 'No Way to Prevent This,' Says Only Nation Where This Happens Regularly. It's a story out of Boulder.

The fourth headline on the homepage reads: 'No Way to Prevent This,' Says Only Nation Where This Happens Regularly. It's a story out of Atlanta.

And on and on and on. It's the only story. It's all the same story.

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I'm gonna ask two things of you this morning.

First, I'm gonna ask you to imagine Thomas. Step into his world for just a moment, if you can. Stir up some empathy for him in your heart.

Here's what I think is going on with Thomas: he knows his world too well. He's seen it, again and again. We moderns tend to keep the picture in our head that we've seen so many times, of three crosses on the hill, Jesus on the middle one and criminals - people who, the story would have us believe, deserved to die, on the other two. Other than that it's a sparse hillside. Desolate. The outline of the three crosses is stark against the setting sun because there is nothing else there.

That's not what Thomas would've seen. That's not the picture he would've had in his head. Because Thomas was a product of his time, and his time, history tells us, was landscaped with crosses. It was meant, like proponents of the death penalty tell us today, as a deterrent. Crucifixion was an act of theatre, performed to not to inspire but to intimidate, so that no one under the Roman regime would have any thoughts of rising up against it. Thomas would've seen Jesus not on one of three crosses but one of countless.

Dorothy Soelle and Luise Schottroff tell us of an ancient source who records, "there was not enough hillside for all the crosses, and not enough crosses for all the bodies."

Thomas knows Jesus as one more innocent struck down, one more visionary cut off, one more prophet silenced, and he has seen it too many times to believe that anything could be different. His friends tell him, “We’ve seen the Lord; he lives again!” and Thomas says, “I’ve seen too many years of this. He doesn’t.”

Thomas doubts what his friends tell him because Thomas is aware of the world. He asks to see the wounds because any encounter with an unjust system leaves its mark. He has seen up close the system that killed Jesus and that system is still in place, still in power. He knows his grieving does nothing to change it. He knows the humanity of any one person sacrificed to the system does nothing to change the system. He knows better than that.

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Theologian James Whitehead says, “Faith is the enduring ability to imagine life in a certain way.”

We imagine life in a certain way all the time. It’s how we get through it. We imagine that when we go to church we will sing, and pray, and listen, and share, and come home. We imagine that when we go to the grocery store we will sniff peaches, and squeeze

grapefruits, and choose potatoes, and gather spices, and come home. We imagine that when we go to school, or when we drop off our kids there, we, they, will learn, and play, and read, and write, and come home.

We imagine the world as good and life-giving; we imagine ourselves as neighbors and friends; we imagine hope and love and justice, as stronger forces than fear and hate and war.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes that we must do this, we must engage in this imagining, “because God is not through with us yet.” She writes, “At our worst moments, both individually and corporately, we act as if that were so. We act as if creation had all been finished a long, long time ago and encased in glass, where we may look at it through the grime of centuries but may not touch.” She says, “Nothing can be further from the truth. The Holy Spirit still moves over the face of the waters, God still breathes life into piles of dust, Jesus still shouts us from our tombs.”

And “to believe that is an act of faith, which is an imaginative act. In faith, we imagine ourselves whole, imagine ourselves in love with our neighbors, imagine ourselves bathed and fed by God,

imagine the creation at peace, imagine the breath of God coinciding with our own, imagine the heart of God beating at the heart of the world.”

But imagining is the beginning. Imagining the world like that just gives us courage to step back into it, to participate with it once more, even when the basic movements of our lives might be dangerous.

We cannot be people of God and permit things to continue as they have been. We cannot be people of God and hear the news and pray and sing and leave the rest to God, or to someone with more power than we think we have. We cannot be people of God and lament for victims and send comfort to families and wring our hands because there’s nothing else we can do. We will not survive, our work of real-izing, of making real, God’s dream for the world will go unfulfilled, if we only do what we always have done.

Do you know how many times we have sent thoughts and prayers to victims’ families? How many times parents have said goodbye to their children in the morning, not knowing that was the last time? How many times we have collectively said that “this must

never happen again” after a school shooting? Two hundred and forty-five. Two hundred and forty-five times we have promised to do better by our children, and we have failed them. That’s only when we send them to school. That’s not counting churches and synagogues and temples and mosques; movie theaters and malls and grocery stores; public parks and festivals and parades. It’s not a tragedy anymore. It is willful negligence.

So here’s the second thing I’m gonna ask you to do this morning: I’m gonna ask you, invite you, to connect with Everytown for Gun Safety. It’s a non-partisan group dedicated to gun violence prevention. It’s really easy to do. Take out your phone. Text ACT, A-C-T, to the number 64433. Now. It will give you some prompts, follow those. If you don’t have your phone with you right now, write down these instructions and follow them when you next have it. The number is 64433, and you just type ACT into the text line and send it off. They will respond immediately. They will ask for your name. They will ask for your zip code. They’ll add you to their list so you will know what’s happening that you can participate with to help make a safer world. They will ask you to sign a petition so our elected officials know that we are paying attention and asking to survive.

We are about to sing a song that is soft, and lovely, and it promises Christ is our shalom. And I hope we hear some comfort in that. And I hope we remember, also, the fullness of the world *shalom* - that it is not just peace, in the form of comfort. The shalom that Christ brings is not soothing. Shalom is peace, in the form of wellness and wholeness. Shalom is holistic thriving. It is flourishing for each of us and for all of us and for all the world. We are part of making it happen. Christ promises it. Christ invites us to it. Christ models it. But it does not happen without us.

Thomas says, “I cannot believe it, I cannot imagine a new way, that is not scarred. My friend suffered and died under this system and I would’ve believed there was nothing after that.” And Jesus says, “It’s true. What is now, what is still, what endures, bears the wounding of what has been. There is no new world ahead that is unscathed by the damage that has been done. But there is still a world. And we continue to be invited to co-create it with God. That has always been the invitation, and it always will be. Touch the wound, know that it is real, and join in the work of building a world where we might no longer wound one another.”

May it be so.