

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter: John 20:19-31

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Seems like, no matter where you live, people have some good weather-based, natural phenomenon stories. My dad's from the Mississippi Delta, and his stories are about floods and earthquakes. He's seen fields of cattle wading along like water buffalo, and he's watched dishes fall from shelves when the New Madrid stretches its legs. My mom's people are from the Ozark Mountains. Their stories involve ice storms and haint hair. She's seen cattle slide down hillsides into lowing bovine piles, and she's marveled at ghostly wisps of mist rising from the ground like a specter waking up. My one grandma told stories of a freak snowstorm that buried the town under a blanket unimaginable down there (but pretty normal for up here), and with the buried town, so went all hopes of that year's tomato crop. My other grandma always talked about the time Crooked Creek broke its banks and flooded everything downtown, even the courthouse. Cars lining the street were stacked two and three high by the power of the rushing deluge. She was just a little girl, but she remembered the scene vividly well into her 80s. It's not often you encounter that kind of power and forget about it.

Up here, your stories don't involve a lot of earthquakes. Or hurricanes. Or even major ice storms. Your stories involve ungodly amounts of snow. Snow so impressively dense or fast-falling that even you winter people can't help but take note. I'm collecting some of those stories myself these days. White outs, blizzards, squalls, nor'easters, freezing fog, snow measured not in inches but in yards. My weather-based story repertoire has grown considerably. I'm sure I'm not alone in this, but I'm the kind of guy who presses his face to the window when the natural world gets to shaking or freezing or blowing. I'll grab a cup of coffee and just watch the power of a storm blow through. Or open the door and shiver while listening for the tiniest sounds under feet of falling snow. Or see just how long it takes for a wet spot to grow into a puddle and then a bonafide water feature. I'm a little bit of a weather nut.

But there's one natural phenomenon I don't mess around with, and that's tornados. Y'all don't get a whole lot of those up here, but they do happen. But where I'm from, we get tons every year. So many that I don't have a handful of tornado stories, I have a handful of tornado stories for every year I've been alive. I can't tell you how many times I've run for shelter, how many times I've hid in the closet under the stairs, how many times I've scrunched up in a bathtub or curled up and tried to grab some sleep in a midnight basement. Every member of my family has harrowing stories of tornados survived. I've made it out of a few tight spots, and I've mourned the loss of life, human, cattle, even entire forests, in the aftermath.

There's a room in a museum in Little Rock that simulates what it's like to be in a house during a nasty tornado, complete with "live" news reports blaring from a radio. Most people I've been there with can't stay inside for long. It's too real, too familiar, too close to real life. Maybe y'all would find it interesting. But I have no interest going back in that room. I've been in it for real too many times. You don't encounter that kind of power and forget about it. And maybe that's a good thing. Terrifying as it is, and it is, knowing that the threat is real at a visceral, muscle-memory level, maybe that helps to preserve us. When the sirens blow, you don't check your phone to see what's happening. You grab everyone and head as deep as you can go. You hope the batteries in the flashlight and the water in bottles stored in your hidey hole are still good. It's not until you've been sitting for a minute in safety that you can look around and take stock. Candles as a last resort, check. Batteries look ok, check. Loved ones accounted for, dear God please let that be a check.

Inevitably, right about the time you're coming to terms with your situation, the power will go out. It's almost a guarantee. It'll be dark, and unnaturally quiet or roaringly loud, and if you got kids, they're freaking out or oblivious, and if you've got pets, they're freaking out or oblivious. And you're freaking out, but you're trying to keep it together. It's about now that the batteries in the radio will die and your cellphone'll lose signal.

So you resort to the radio you gotta crank every couple of minutes, and all you hear is the lengthening path of destruction ripping through town names you vaguely remember seeing on road signs, and you pray that the storm hits that one hill outside of town just right so it turns south. Or hits the river and fizzles out. Or somehow just gives up the ghost and sends the funnel with a twisting retreat back into the sky.

I gotta admit, even just talking about this, I can feel my muscles getting tense. Fr. Steve, I bet yours are, too. Anyone else that's lived where tornados are common, I suspect you're feeling it. This eldritch knowledge waking up that you'd forgotten you had. My brain's assessing this room I'm in right now for the best route to some kind of shelter. How fast could I get there, would it actually hold up, who else could squeeze in? That memory of real danger is embedded in my flesh. I carry it with me all the time, and it's there to preserve me some day when I need it again, though I hope I won't.

In years passed, I've taken the opportunity to defend Thomas today. It's from this encounter with the Risen Christ that he becomes "Doubting Thomas." The Bishop talked about this when we were together for Palm Sunday. I'm sure Fr. Steve has talked about it, too. It doesn't seem fair. Thomas is out and about, the disciples cower, Jesus shows up, shows off his wounds, and Thomas is the first to confess him as "my Lord and my God." He really should be "Confessing Thomas" or "Out and About Thomas" or anything but "Doubting." And as the priest of St. Thomas' Church, I've got some skin in this game! But y'all have heard that take by now. Maybe it's a healthy reminder, but it's nothing new for y'all, and frankly, it's nothing new for this preacher, either.

In my attempts to defend Thomas, though, I think I've given the rest of the disciples short shrift. I've upheld Thomas for being brave enough to go out after Jesus' death, but I've criticized the disciples for cowering indoors. But as the priest of St. Thomas' over this past year, I haven't lived into that model upheld by Out and About Thomas terribly well. I've gone out and about once or twice on extreme occasions, but mostly I've stayed home. I've stayed home for fear of the very real danger, and I've stayed home to keep myself and other people safe. And in all this staying home, maybe I'm gaining a little appreciation for all those disciples that stayed home, too. Of course, maybe I'm just rationalizing here, but I think this is real. Those disciples just witnessed the powers that be colluding with each other to silence their leader and their friend. It was a nasty thing, full of disappointment and loss and great sadness. And it became clear very quickly that anyone who had associated with the Jesus that had just been brought down would very likely suffer the same dismal fate. The threat of death was very real. You don't encounter that kind of power and forget about it. And don't forget, this wasn't the first time the powers that be had flexed their muscles around those parts. The empire made their strength known, and these conquered people would've known in their bones what to do when the empire decided a good cracking down was needed. They knew when to head for a safe room, when to run through the inventory of candles and loved ones and enough food to ride out the storm.

Over the past year and change, we've all hunkered down in various ways. We aren't hiding from Christ here, we're surviving so that we may live another day, waiting for the storm to pass now so that we can serve God fully a little longer. I've always pictured the disciples cowering in this scene, but I don't think that's real, and I don't think it's fair to them. They're in that hidden room surviving to live another day. Probably scared and anxious and maybe even a little bored, doing whatever the first century equivalent of binge-watching Netflix was. They've encountered unimaginable, angry power, and they're trying not to focus too much on what could be, no, on what certainly is on the other side of the door. We don't know why Thomas was out and about, just that he was. Maybe they drew lots and he was the one to go get groceries? Maybe he snuck out to see a friend? Maybe he boldly proclaimed the Good News of Christ in the face of grave danger? We don't know. All we

know is that he managed a way to go out as the sirens roared and came back alive and faithful, and he came back to a room full of his friends, who were also alive and faithful.

We've been in that room for a long time. We've been gathered in our safe houses praying and waiting and holding the faith while the very real dangers of the world raged. And that's ok. Maybe it's even a moral good. We've managed to adapt our faith to a new context. Who knew Episcopalians could be so flexible? Y'all, we have encountered a natural power and we cannot afford to forget what we've learned. Years from now, I suspect I'll still be the guy that wears a mask when I get a cold. You better believe I'm gonna keep a thing of sanitizer handy. And sadly it's gonna be a long time before I can convince myself to give buffets a try again. But we're getting to that stage of the storm when the sirens have stopped ripping through the night air. The storm still rages, the threat still is, but the immediate danger has passed us by, and not necessarily unscathed. We've learned a great deal from our hidden rooms, and many of us are inoculated against the greatest danger. Another storm may come just as this same storm continues around us. The power is still there, but we know more. We know when to retreat, and we know how, something I sure couldn't say a year ago.

You know, I have a brother-in-law that grew up in Kansas. Those tornado sirens that send me rushing to the basement? Well, they send him out to the front porch. He moseys outside to take a gander at the sky. Sometimes he'll rush back to the basement, too, but most of the time, he stands there, completely still save his hair swirling in the wind, watching the clouds shift and dip and rage. We can't all be Out and About Thomas. Some of us are always going to be Run For Cover Peter or Storm Shelter Saul. And I think that's ok. This story of fear and power and resurrection needs every one of us to tell it. And to do that, we need Thomases who will go out and brave the storm, but we also need disciples who aren't there yet, disciples who preserve the story by preserving themselves. Disciples who will share the Glory of God once they've survived.

St. Thomas' is gonna start in-person services next Sunday. Fr. Steve, I know your churches have done this once or twice already, and word on the street is y'all are eyeballing Pentecost as the next time. In a way, y'all were Out and About Thomas to us. And we're going to give Thomas a try here pretty soon. But even within this church, there's still room for Thomases in-person and just-as-faithful other disciples on Zoom. You know, I hadn't thought of this before, but isn't it incredible that, whether out and about or sitting in safety, Christ still comes to 'em all? I think we're going to be ok, folks. Whether we're in-person or still online, Christ comes to us all. The same Christ who preached grace and forgiveness and justice. The same Christ who we saw die and now see among us again. The same Christ who promises a place for us in God's Kingdom. That Christ comes to us all. You don't encounter that kind of power and forget about it. Alleluia! Christ is Risen!