

“Unraveled: When the Unimaginable Has Happened”  
John 20:19-29

When the pandemic began, most of us felt that this was not really true or that such a thing could never really happen to us. With all the scientific advances we have made, we did not imagine such a pandemic to be possible. Yet, there were people who imagined this and wanted us to prepare. People like Dr. Fauci and Bill Gates were talking about this for years and calling world leaders to prepare for the next outbreak. They had the foresight and knowledge to know that we needed to prepare for what most of us thought of as unimaginable.

In a way that is what happened to the disciples when they lost Jesus. The unimaginable had happened to them. The leader of their movement, the one they love and followed, was executed. Even though Jesus had warned them that this was going to happen to him once he confronted the powers and leadership in Jerusalem, they could not imagine this possibility. Jesus tried to prepare them for this possibility and for continuing his mission after he was gone from their midst, but they could not let themselves go there. We can relate to this kind of denial from personal experiences. When a loved one is dying or talks about their death, our first instinct is to deny it. It is hard to come to terms with great losses and one of the coping mechanisms we have is to deny or to be in a state of doubt and disbelief.

When life unraveled around them, the disciples struggled to move forward. They needed to be reminded of their eternal connection to Jesus before they could find their way through. Each of them had to go back to that experience of awe they had with Jesus. The one who got left out, Thomas, also needed that. The first time the disciples experienced a vision of Jesus, Thomas was not there and so he had a hard time accepting the witness of his friends. We can relate to that. When others tell us about their experiences of God and of the sacred, we may admire it, but it is not the same as when we personally experience it. That is why, all the great preaching and teaching about God will always fall short of transforming people if it is not grounded by one's personal experience of the divine. The teaching and preaching could help prepare us to receive revelation, but they can't be enough by themselves. That is one of the major criticisms we have of Christianity as a religion. It is often limited to a belief system and many Christians don't really display the spirit of Christ of unconditional love and grace. Thomas is often maligned for his doubt, but he is a great example for us when we feel overwhelmed and that life is unraveling around us. When the unimaginable had happened, Thomas shows us that we need to rely on the experiences of those who have gone before us and who have found a way forward through awe and connection to the Spirit of Christ.

Two important pieces to highlight from the story. First, Jesus comes to the disciples in the evening (in the first part of the story). In the Gospel of Jesus, light and darkness are important symbols. Jesus comes as the light of the world to those places of deep fear and brokenness. The second piece is the word “see.” This is another important part of the experience of the disciples. They were the ones who learned how to “see” the world through the eyes of Jesus. This was another reminder for them to pay attention to this kind of seeing.

The unimaginable has happened to us and keeps happening in our world today! The losses we have experienced are too many to count. Last week, I reflected on the many ministries that have ceased to be in our community due to the virus: The Dementia Respite, the Crossroads House training and events, the Breast Cancer Support Group, the weekly Centering Prayer and yoga, the weekly friendship gatherings of coffee and other groups, small groups ministry, and on and on! And yet just like the disciples, we are called to rely on a different kind of knowing to find our way through. We have to rely on our expert, Jesus Christ, who knew that the only way through the brokenness of this world is through reclaiming our loving connection to God, to others, and to all of creation. That is why he indulged Thomas and his questioning. He helped him learn once more in a very personal way the power of our connection to the heartbeat of God.

This is the power of faith! It helps us to find that deeper connection. This whole sermon series has been about navigating the challenges that come our way, the many ways life unravels: our minds, our bodies, our certainties, our vocation, our relationships, our human systems, our expectations, and our norms. In all of these challenges, the way forward always begins with one's personal or communal experiences of awe.

Last Sunday, I listened to Rick Steves on NPR who was hosting author Wallace J. Nichols about how being near water helps us find peace. In the discussion about his book *Blue Mind*, Nichols talked about "the Awe Factor" which helps heal us. This is a scientific term used by people like Paul Piff to talk about our experiences of awe. What is amazing about looking at such experiences is analyzing their impact on us. One such effect is that of oneness with others. When we experience awe, our worldview shifts from focusing on ourselves to experiencing a powerful connection to all of life. Awe helps us to transcend the fears and concerns of the small self. That is why experiences of awe transform and heal us. One group that is using the power of this kind of healing is called, "Operation Surf," where they use surfing to help veterans heal from trauma and to find peace. What Jesus invited his disciples to do was to continue to see through the eyes of faith and wonder. In the same way, we are invited to ground ourselves in intentional times of wonder/awe through experiences of nature, water, prayer, meditation, beauty, art, music, love, caring touch, and compassion. Worship at its heart is about those experiences of wonder and awe. I invite you to share with me and with one another what helps you experience awe and the effect it has on you. If we want to heal the world, the brokenness of our world, the tried and true path is that of wonder.

I really believe that awe is a little bit of heaven inside of us. In times of brokenness, the best path forward is through accessing heaven while we are on earth, just like the disciples touched heaven when they saw a vision of Jesus after his death. So now we are going to practice together accessing this awe within us through guided imagery. Sit comfortably and begin breathing deeply and slowly, paying attention to each inhale and exhale. Imagine that you are lying on the ground in the middle of a large field. It is nighttime and pitch black. There are no trees or buildings around you, nothing to distract you from a full view of God's magnificent night sky. You see millions of stars shining brilliantly like diamonds on black velvet, more stars than you can even begin to count. Just rest, relax, and enjoy the peace of God's beautiful creation. As you lie there, you find yourself wondering what the universe might look like from the point of view of eternity. Your mind drifts to a point of view from a few hundred feet above you. You allow your imagination to zoom out of the scene. Now you can see the field that you are in, as well

as nearby towns and roads. You imagine moving further towards space. You can now see other towns and cities that are around yours. You continue to imagine going higher until you can see the entire state, and finally the entire county in which you live. As you imagine yourself moving higher, you notice that you can see the entire continent that you live on. The earth soon appears as a beautiful blue and green globe, suspended in the nothingness of space. As you continue to imagine yourself moving further away, you see the moon orbiting the earth. Both become smaller and smaller. The sun and the other planets come into view and then shrink as you continue moving further away. The earth itself is now just a small, pale blue dot, no more brilliant than the still distant stars. The earth and the sun quickly become lost among the billions of other stars. You imagine that you are exiting the Milky Way galaxy, and as you look down on it, you are aware that the earth lies somewhere lost in one of its spiral arms. Other galaxies come into view, dozens, then hundreds, then thousands, then millions of galaxies, all of them dim smudges of light against the dark vastness of space. As you look out into space, you become aware of the immensity and power of a God that can create such a universe. The words of Psalm 8 come to mind: "When I look up at the heavens, At the work of God's creation At the infinite variety of your Plan; What is woman that you rejoice in her, And man that you do delight in him?" As you imagine yourself surrounded by millions of galaxies, you realize how small the earth is as part of God's creation, and how small you are on the earth. And like millions of galaxies, God touches ours. God touches you. You are a part of this amazing universe. Silently thank God for this wonderful gift now. May we continue to feel this awesome presence long after this meditation ends. Amen.