

Where Boundary Lines Have Fallen
John 20:19-31; Psalm 16:5-11; I Peter 1:3-9
Second Sunday of Easter

I Peter 1:3-9

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

⁶In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, ⁷so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

⁸Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, ⁹for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Psalm 16:5-11

⁵The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot.

⁶The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage.

⁷I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me.

⁸I keep the Lord always before me;

because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.

⁹Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure.

¹⁰For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit.

¹¹You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

John 20:19-31

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

Hymn 286: Breathe on Me, Breath of God

²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

²⁶A week later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” ²⁸Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!”

²⁹Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ²⁹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Prayer

Blessed Creator, Beautiful Savior, Holy Animator,

I beg of you—

you who are not humanly flawed,
you who alone have a right to judge me,
you, to whom alone I give permission
to hold me accountable to what you want me to believe and do:

be impatient with me.

Grow impatient with my repeated promises
to dismantle the locks on my doors that would keep everyone out,
including you.

And hear me, if you will, as I pray the words of John Donne,
your servant from half a millennium ago:

*Batter my heart, three-person'd God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.ⁱ Amen.*

The Sermon

Before 1860, no Westerner had ever been into the interior of Australia. If you can imagine the map of the lower 48 United States, and then draw a boundary line all around it about 20 miles inland all the way around, practically everything within a similar amount of space on the whole continent of Australia was unknown to the outside world. At the time that an underprepared and ill-fated expedition was first launched into it in 1860, that impossibly gigantic, entirely uncharted, unknown, mysterious vastness was known only as The Ghastly Blank.ⁱⁱ

Sometimes the unknown spaces, including the spaces between people, are just the normal, natural boundaries that keep us whole and healthy as individuals.

And sometimes, the space between people is an epic scope of dark mystery and fear and trepidation: a ghastly blank, a chasm, a void between nations and races and cultures—and, sometimes, neighbors, or family members, or spouses.

And sometimes it's the gap that separates us from an understanding of ourselves.

And sometimes it's the gap that separates us from our ability to accept that the Creator God is the same God who loves and knows you, and me, and each of us, intimately and profoundly.

Missing from John's narrative is the exact moment that Thomas returned home and knocked on the door and gave the password, or used the key under the mat, or did whatever he needed to do to gain entrance into the fearfully locked house that he and his companions were using as home base while they had been trying, presumably, to figure out what to do next.

What kind of visual exchange do you suppose took place when one of the disciples—who had been there when they had had the profoundly unexpected

opportunity to greet and worship the risen Jesus—opened up the door for Thomas, the disciple, who had not?

Was there a strange silence when Thomas walked through the door and looked around before stepping into the room?

Did he sense that there was a reality in that room whose details were unknown to him, but which was as undeniable as the fact that Thomas himself was now standing there?

Whether the communication was verbal or non-verbal, it was clear that something extraordinary had happened. But it had only happened to those who were in the room at the time.

And of all of them, all eleven of the disciples left after Judas's betrayal, Thomas was the only one who had missed the boat.

I imagine he stood there in the doorway, looking at the roomful of people with whom he had been through so much. I wonder if, the fellowship having been tested before, this was the first great test of the community's stability as a community since the events of the crucifixion had first scattered, and then reunited them.

What does it feel like to be Thomas—the one who is out of the room, or out of the loop, when a profoundly transformative experience lays down an invisible but absolutely palpable boundary line, a ghastly blank between those who have lived it and those who have not?

Christopher Stewart is a journalist who wrote a book about the horrific wars and atrocities—all war is an atrocity—in Yugoslavia in the early 1990s.ⁱⁱⁱ Brutal, militarily-armed gangs of thugs—Serbs, or Croats, or Bosnian Muslims—terrorized and wiped out villages of opposing Serbs, or Croats, or Bosnian Muslims, ruthlessly destroying whole villages, towns and cities, and the inhumanity was jaw-dropping.

Stewart interviewed a young man, who went by the name Trax, who had been part of one of those paramilitary groups.

Trax had been forcibly conscripted into one of those paramilitary groups, when all he had wanted was to be a young man making a peaceful life for himself in the city.

A few years later, when the horror had ended, he and countless others like him had gone back home to try to carry on with life as it had been before the cataclysm. But of course they could never be the same again. They had seen and participated in things that were not normal, or sane, or in any way tolerable.

After interviewing Trax for a while, the journalist found himself struggling to make sense of what he was hearing. And he wrote, “Listening to [this young man] talk about the war was a lot like standing out in a strange lawn, in the dark, staring into the window of a strange house. I wanted to get a glimpse of what went on inside that house, how it shaped the lives of the people in it, but all I felt was separate and far away.”^{iv}

He wrote, “I told [Trax how far from understanding him I felt,] and he just shook his head sadly. ‘It won’t make sense to you,’ he told me. ‘Ever. *Because you weren’t there.*’”^v

Christopher Stewart felt a million miles away from someone who had seen, and been part of, a glimpse of hell on earth. For Thomas, the gap was between him and his friends and companions, who, without him, had just seen a glimpse of heaven. I daresay the chasm was just as wide.

And the ghastly blank was a theological skepticism that put them on one side of a boundary line and him on the other: “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” For years, I have read and preached and studied and prayed that verse as Thomas—for whom I have always had enormous sympathy and respect—putting his foot down. But I wonder if it is to be read more as a simple recognition on his part, rather than as an ultimatum.

I was a seminary student in Chicago 27 years ago, and I used to go downtown to Union Station to take the train down to my hometown for a week-end every once in a while; and on this day, I had a definite timeline where I needed to be there at a certain time, and would just make it if I caught the right train.

I managed to get a ride to someplace not too far from the station, but I was running late—I mean literally running; precious minutes were ticking away before the train was going to leave, with or without me—and, just when I needed it least, I heard the rattle of keys hitting the sidewalk. Somehow, they had fallen out of my pocket.

I stopped running long enough to turn around and see, about ten feet behind me, a professionally dressed African American man with a briefcase in one hand and a sympathetic smile on his face, who had very kindly picked up my keys and was holding them out for me.

“Thank you so much;” a quick smile as he continued on his own serious way; and I took off running for the station again; and all of a sudden, Clang! “Oh, you’ve got to be kidding;” I had dropped my keys again.

Same guy is behind me; same guy kindly picks them up; I give an embarrassed laugh at myself and offer profuse thanks; and he gives a dignified nod of acknowledgement.

Now I’ve really got to run, so here I go. Clang! “Oh, come on!”

This time I turn around and he’s looking at me with a look that is, er, significantly less sympathetic. It turned out—and you really want to pick up on this the first time—I had a heretofore undiscovered hole in my pocket.

But this wonderful man—impatient, disgusted, or just baffled as he was, busy with his own pressing affairs—still handed me my keys.

I had received the gift of his graciousness once, twice, and then a third time.

Has Jesus ever come back for you? Have you ever been forgiven for something, and then had to ask forgiveness again for the same thing?

Mark testifies about an event in Bethsaida, about halfway through Jesus’ journey. He keeps doing these healings for people, and word keeps getting out, but for whatever reason, Jesus is not ready for that; he keeps saying, “Now don’t tell anybody,” but the testimony of the healing is so powerful that the people who have been healed can’t help themselves and they run to the nearest town, village or city and tell everybody they can find.

In Bethsaida, some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch the man so he could see. He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village;

and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, “Can you see anything?”

And the man looked up and said, “I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.”

Jesus has already had the man brought to him and received the request of the people who cared enough about the blind man to bring him to Jesus and make the request.

He has already—after, I imagine, a quick glance over the shoulder as he tries to make sure nobody around has heard this request—taken the time and made the effort to lead the man, by the hand, on a painstaking trust walk outside of town, Jesus guiding carefully; the man gingerly stepping where Jesus leads him,

until they are well out of the village, away from the eyes and ears of those who would see the uproar of praise or overhear the shouts of joy. Jesus has already been through this so many times: the healing; the admonition not to talk about it; the inevitable disobedience of his request and the subsequent unwanted publicity.

He’s already given the man miraculous healing—the guy can see more than he used to be able to see.

But he still doesn’t see people as people. They look like trees, walking—the same way we see people who are different from us. The same way we see people who know nothing of our experience, and whose lives we can only compare against our own, the subconscious and baseless assumption that they have had all the privileges we have had, that they have faced all the same challenges we have, and that had we been in their shoes, we would be doing things much different and frankly much better than they do.

That’s not seeing others as people. That’s seeing others as nothing more than trees that can walk.

And though Jesus’ healing touch has given us some ability to see better than we otherwise did—I mean, we come to church and try to be nice to people, right?—for Jesus, that is not good enough.

So Jesus, in a way, “came back.” He did the same miracle again, for the same guy.

He laid his hands on his eyes again; and the man looked intently, and this time, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.^{vi}

And, in what I think is one of the funniest lines in the whole New Testament, Jesus said to him, “Don’t even *go into* the village.”

Now that the man had had his sight fully restored, he could see the people who had cared enough to bring him to Jesus.

And he could see the Son of God, right there next to him: the physician who had restored his sight; the teacher who took time, and then more time, to restore to him the ability to see the world around him, and to remember and celebrate the existence of a community of people who had had enough faith to ask God—that is, to pray—on his behalf, teaching him the power of trusting God.

Jesus had heard a community’s prayer, and had healed one person, and then healed that person again, and restored in him his sense of being one person and recognizing others as persons.

Some years ago, my brother Ken and his brother-in-law, Greg, undertook a hike of the Hundred Mile Wilderness, the punishing stretch at the Northern end of the Appalachian Trail.

There’s a warning sign just as you are about to enter it—DON’T DO THIS if you’re not a trained, experienced hiker.^{vii}

In that great book about the Appalachian Trail, *A Walk in the Woods*, Bill Bryson reported something about a guy stumbling off the trail and collapsing into the arms of his wife, who was waiting there, and just sobbing uncontrollably; and the taxi driver who was ready to take them into town said, “You know, trail hiking is a voluntary activity...”^{viii}

Ken and his brother-in-law, Greg, were a week into their ten-day excursion.

Day 7 had been their longest day yet. Ken said they were extremely—actually, critically—dehydrated, and unbeknownst to them at the time, the spice packets they had been using on just about everything they ate were chewing tiny holes in his stomach lining. The more he walked, the more dehydrated he became, and the pain grew exponentially.

They had been leap-frogging another pair of hikers for the previous two days. Both nice guys, particularly a thin, white guy from out east, with long dreadlocks and a

thick New England accent they called Boston Bob Marley. He'd walked into their night camp at dusk one evening looking for somebody else. They asked him to sit and eat with them, but he graciously declined, and as he had left, he called out, "Enjoy ya dinnah!"

But when they crossed paths with Boston Bob on this day, it was obvious Ken was in a bad way.

There was rumored to be a small store about two miles off the trail, though nobody was sure if it was really there, and if so, it could always be closed once you had added two painful miles to your trek and then two more miles back to the trail.

Well, Boston Bob and his friend were going to go anyway, and he told Ken he would see if they had anything that might help. Ken tried to give him some money, but he wouldn't accept it; he said that if there was nothing there and he never saw Ken again, he'd feel like he had robbed him. Ken and Greg told him where they were planning to camp: somewhere down on the shore of Lake Namantanka, 8-10 miles to the north.

By the time they got to the lake, nothing could ease the pain, and Ken was curled up on the rocky sand in a fetal position while Greg set up the tent.

As daylight began to fade, all of a sudden, there was Boston Bob, standing there with a big smile on his face and a plastic bag full of Tums in his hand. They invited him again to share their dinner, and this time, he agreed. He said his friend had stayed their course, and it was then that Ken and Greg realized that Boston Bob would end up walking more than five miles round trip, out of his way, just to deliver some over-the-counter medicine to a guy with whom he was barely acquainted.

He still wouldn't take any money. "Ahh, they're just Tums ya know. Might nought do much faw ya." They shook hands, said their goodbyes, and Greg walked Boston Bob up the shore toward the trail, and bade him farewell. They never crossed paths with Boston Bob or his friend again.^{ix}

What does it feel like when someone goes out of their way to make sure you know you matter: you are included, and appreciated, and valued?

Faith is not really about feeling, but the sense of what that feels like leads human beings in the direction of God.

A long week went by while Thomas lived in the house with his fellow disciples, navigating the Ghastly Blank between his companions' experience and his own.

And then, just like the week before, although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

He turned to Thomas, and said, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."

When Jesus said, "Reach out your hand," Thomas said, "My Lord and my God!"

He had blessed the whole community, and then came back to make sure that every individual in that community had been given access to the Peace of Christ.

*Batter my heart, three-person'd God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new...^x*

*The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot.
The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
I have a goodly heritage.
You show me the path of life.^{xi}*

The story of Thomas is in some ways the story of that first Christian church: the gathering of disciples now together to witness to the resurrection of Jesus the Christ,

And the story of that first church is the story of Thomas—the one, the individual, who missed out on a community forming moment and was not excluded from that transformed community; and even though there were things that they had experienced that he had not, the risen Christ came and specifically blessed him in their presence.

None of us were there that first time. And here we are today—with all of our different experiences, our different stories, our different opinions, our different interpretations, our different preferences and understandings and interests and abilities—each one welcomed and loved in one community; each one with our individual relationship with the God who made us and, for whatever divine reason,

placed us here, now, in these bodies and these circumstances wherein the one who died for each of us—for all of us—comes back to each and all, and invites us to live for him and for one another.

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April 23, 2017

ⁱ John Donne (1572-1631), “Holy Sonnets” (XIV) in Donne, *Selected Poems* (New York: Dover, 1993), 64. The punctuation here is as presented at poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/44106.

ⁱⁱ Harry Mount, “Braving the Ghastly Blank” (book review of Sarah Murgatroyd Bloomsbury, *The Dig Tree*). *The Spectator*. (retrieved from <https://www.questia.com/magazine/1P3-114785577/braving-the-ghastly-blank>)

ⁱⁱⁱ Christopher Stewart, *Hunting the Tiger* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2008).

^{iv} Stewart, *Hunting the Tiger*, 182.

^v Stewart, *Hunting the Tiger*, 182. Emphasis added.

^{vi} Mark 8:22-25.

^{vii} Bill Bryson, *A Walk in the Woods* (New York: Broadway, 1998), 253.

^{viii} Bryson, *A Walk in the Woods*. I can’t come up with the page number, but it’s in there somewhere, I promise.

^{ix} This narrative is adapted—though it’s mostly verbatim—from a personal correspondence by Ken Grogg to the author dated April 20, 2017.

^x Donne, “Holy Sonnets” (XIV).

^{xi} From Psalm 16:5-6, 11 (NRSV).