

April 28, 2019
The Second Sunday of Easter
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Acts 5:27-32
Psalm 150
Revelation 1:4-8
John 20:19-31

Danadari Kuruppuachchi, 36, of Sri Lanka, was a manager at a clothing manufacturer, and regularly posted photos of her smiling family on social media. She and her husband, Clode Eshan Rangana Fernando, 41, had been married for nine years and were at St. Sebastian's Church in Negombo with their three children at the time of the attack, a family member said.

Their daughter Fabiola Fernando, 6, was an elementary school student. In a photo posted to her mother's Facebook page, she showed off a gold medal, a small smile on her face. Daughter Leona Fernando, 4, the middle child in her family, was learning to read and was holding a copy of "Sleeping Beauty" in the picture. Son Seth Fernando, 11 months, was the newest addition to the Fernando family. He was buried alongside his parents and two sisters.

K. Pirathap, 38, of Sri Lanka drove a rickshaw in Colombo. He, his wife, Anashdi, 35, and their two daughters, Antinaa, 7, and Abriyaana, 1, were all killed at St. Anthony's Shrine. The family was in a celebratory mood at Mass on Sunday: Mr. Pirathap had just purchased a new vehicle.

Ramesh Raju, 40, of Sri Lanka was a father, husband and building contractor. His family told the BBC that he had died while trying to protect others at Zion Church in Batticaloa.¹

That's an excerpt from a *New York Times* article from this week. Those are just a handful of the Sri Lankans killed in last Sunday's terrorist attacks. As you know, a large proportion of the victims were Christians attending worship on Easter Sunday morning. By Sunday night, Christians across Sri Lanka must have been hiding away in fear. Apparently so were Muslims, concerned that all would be blamed for the actions of a very few. Muslims were the targets of last month's attack in Christchurch, New Zealand. Jews have been targets, too; here in the United States, just yesterday there was yet another attack at a synagogue.

In that incident, a man has been arrested; supposedly the "manifesto" he posted online blames Jews for killing Jesus. That's a centuries-old falseness that we need to resist. In my sermon four Sundays ago, I mentioned anti-Semitism in Christianity, which our scriptures are used to justify. Most problematic is the Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of John. It's also mined in today's reading, which depicts the disciples gathered in a house with doors locked "for fear of the Jews." So let me be very clear: Jesus was killed by Roman political authorities for being a socially dangerous rabble-rouser. Jesus was killed by Roman political authorities for being a socially dangerous rabble-rouser. The Gospel of John was written down at least sixty years later, probably even later than that, with a rhetorical perspective tuned by subsequent events.

The being said, I think it's useful to recognize that Jesus' death would have left the disciples with fear—though not of the Jews, and rather of the Roman political authorities. In today's reading, we join the disciples on the first Easter night. Just that morning, Mary Magdalene had found the open tomb, summoned Peter and the Beloved Disciple, and then returned to encounter the risen Christ. We heard about that in our reading from John last Sunday, which concluded with this:

Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.²

The story picks up that evening. The disciples are gathered behind those fearfully locked doors. Appearing among them, Jesus greets them with what is best translated from the original Greek as simply, "Peace." He doesn't say that peace is coming; it's not a wish or a promise. Peace simply *is*. Peace is there in that room. Jesus then breathes on the disciples. This action recalls important moments from the Hebrew Scriptures: in Genesis, God breathes life into the first human body; in Ezekiel, God breathes life into the bodies resurrected from dry bones. In the Gospel of John, this is the moment of Pentecost, as Jesus gives his followers the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Thomas is absent that first night, and he remains unconvinced by the stories told by the other disciples. Fortunately for Thomas, Jesus returns a week later and invites Thomas to touch his wounds. Though we know the disciple as Doubting Thomas, in the original Greek the word for *doubt* is not actually used in this passage. The word used is actually more like *unbelief*, and it's used in opposition to the word *belief*. And so a better translation of Jesus' response to Thomas is this: "Do not be *unbelieving*, but *believing*."

That first Easter night, when Jesus arrives, the disciples are fearfully *self*-entombed. Jesus doesn't let the disciples lock *him* out, but neither will he let the disciples lock *themselves* in. That morning Jesus exited one prison; he now rescues the disciples from another. Jesus *might* be there to *comfort* his disciples; he's *definitely* there to *prepare* them to *leave*. He empowers them with both with *authority* and *ability*: the authority and the ability to continue his work of reconciling all creation to God and one another.

In exhorting Thomas to belief, Jesus recognizes all who must believe without seeing the resurrected Christ himself. He broadens the field to include not just those who were with him in body, but also those who will be with him in Spirit. I think that's how the story reaches out to us and brings us into it. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe"—Jesus might as well be naming me and you. Now, it was during his life that Jesus demonstrated what it means to believe. This is not just amendment of *thought*; it's also amendment of *life*. It's about discipleship.

The Thomas in today's Gospel is our patron saint. He must have gotten what he needed from Jesus that day. Though the evidence is sketchy, he is said to have become a missionary, and to have traveled as far as India, where he was martyred. His symbols include a builder's square, to indicate his profession, and a spear, to show his means of death.

For many Christians *then*, following Jesus Christ was costly. For many Christians *today*, following Jesus is costly.

When I first saw that article in *The New York Times* about the victims in Sri Lanka, I decided to ignore it, because I knew it would make me sad. But the headline kept showing up when I checked the news, and finally I followed that link. The article did make me sad. It made me sad, it made me discouraged, it made me look at the world with a little bit of despondency. But still, I needed to read it.

There are things I don't understand about the Bible, but I understand fear, and I understand doubt. Fear and doubt are absolutely appropriate responses to the situations we experience. The problem is that fear and doubt lead us to build walls that shut the world out, and walls that shut us in. They mislead us into thinking that God has abandoned us, and thereby inadvertently to reject the blessings that God has in store for us. They leave us bereft of joy and hope.

However and why-ever we have locked ourselves away, Jesus steps in, and Jesus asks us to step out. As Jesus broke into that house, he breaks into our hearts. When fear and doubt take root, Jesus invites us to touch the wounds of others—and even to allow our own wounds to be touched. Through these exchanges, we continue to find evidence of the resurrected Christ. It is exactly through these exchanges that fear and doubt yield to joy and hope.

We gather together as sometimes fearful and sometimes doubtful disciples. Remember, peace *is*. Jesus has breathed the Holy Spirit into you. Do not be unbelieving, but believing.

Here's the deal: *truly* following Jesus *is* costly, in every time and in every place. That's an assertion that mainline Protestant church leaders in *this* time and place hesitate to make. We fear exposing our own hypocrisy; we fear chasing away our few remaining congregants. Our congregants have good reason to be wary; the Church and its leaders have often failed them, in ways broadly institutional and intimately personal.

Still, here it is: truly following Jesus is costly. God is unlikely to call any of us into literal martyrdom. But God calls every one of us to give our lives in service to Christ. At times, that will involve following God's will instead of our own. At times, that will involve sacrifice and discomfort. The path will unfold differently for each one of us, but it will cost us *something*.

Maybe, just maybe, rather than *costly*, we might think of it as *valuable*, as in an *investment*. Maybe, as disciples of Jesus, we're all called to make valuable investments in the kingdom of God. We are people of peace; we are called to bring peace to every situation that needs it. Our investments in the kingdom of God are actually the *only* investments worth making.

Notes

¹ “Victims of the Sri Lanka Terrorist Attacks,” *The New York Times*, April 23, 2019, available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/23/world/asia/sri-lanka-bombings-victims.html?action=click&module=RelatedCoverage&pgtype=Article®ion=Footer> (accessed April 26, 2019).

² John 20:18, NRSV.