



## *Richmond Hill Reflections*

**“Waiting for Answers”** (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

April 19, 2020; Second Sunday of Easter

Reading: John 20:19-29; Excerpt from Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Letters on Love*

I’ve been feeling just on the edge lately, welling up to the tiniest sentiment on TV. I realize we’re a week into the Easter Season but I still feel like I did on Sunday, looking into the empty tomb with Mary. As I stand with her I realize we’re not alone in our feelings. There’s another of Jesus’ followers feeling equally overwhelmed. His name is Thomas Judah. Thomas is the anglicization of Didymus, that is, twin. There’s conjecture about this name. Some say that because Jesus had a brother named Judah, Thomas was Jesus’ twin. Others suggest that he was the twin of Judas Iscariot. Perhaps it was just a nickname from before he met any of the disciples. Maybe it’s not about any of that. I wonder if it speaks to how devoted he was to Jesus, after all, earlier in the gospel he was ready to go to Jerusalem and die with him. In which case perhaps, like Mary, he separated himself from the rest because it was the only way he could grieve. When told by his friends how Jesus appeared to them, he was on one hand incredulous, and another, hurt that Jesus didn’t appear to him. Perhaps his demand for physical proof was him deflecting, seeking rational reasons in order to protect his heart.

Grieving often includes trying to find reasons for what has happened. We well know that there’s no guarantee answers will be found, and that’s OK. Rilke invites us to love the questions, to treat them like locked rooms or a text in a language we don’t understand. That’s wise advice, especially right now. Our collective experience these days is grief, and within that there’s a current of explanation-seeking in the air. We hear it in conspiracy theories about how the virus started, in speculations about how the WHO initially handled news of the outbreak and the influence of a powerful nation, and in critiques of national supply chains and emergency readiness. Some questions are legitimate, others not so much. For the legitimate questions, answers will come. But in many ways the questions that are being asked are mostly just Thomas saying “I need to understand why this is happening!”

There’s some Rilke-esque business wisdom that fits here: “Love the question, not the solution.” Often an entrepreneur has a big idea and creates a product only to find it doesn’t result in untold riches. Why? The big idea solves too small a question. The entrepreneur needed to dig deeper into the root issues facing their customers. This applies to our situation, a spotlight being shone on big holes in our social safety net, most notably long-term care homes. Once the virus is under control, I’m sure solutions will be sought, likely with big dollars attached. I fear we won’t pause long enough to ask why those dollars weren’t there in the first place. Another question relates to the dire situation in shelters. Again solutions will be sought but will we dig into the root causes of homelessness and respond in a way that views those of us sleeping rough as equal partners. The more I sit with one

question, the more others emerge: income security, property speculation, access to technology, racial marginalization. And those are questions we're grappling with here. They don't begin to address concerns impacting the global south: refugee camps, poor drinking water and sanitation, inadequate healthcare. As we head toward Earth Day, I find myself looking further, pondering the link between risk of pandemics and the human impact on the environment. As we ponder how to live with greater compassion for other humans, will we pause long enough to consider how we are part of a sacred web, that what we do to one strand impacts the whole?

I'm in no position to give answers. To do so undermines Rilke's advice. Besides, we need to consider these questions together. Our gospel offers insight. When Jesus appears to Thomas, he accepts his questions, accepts how he is feeling, then says to him, "Believe". This isn't about an assertion of the mind but an invitation to trust. If we really are in this together, we need to trust one another, believe we all want what is best. As I wrestle with questions, I start from my own assumptions. We all do. When I hear an opinion I struggle with, I need to reframe my reaction from judgement to curiosity, from "How can you think like that?" to "I wonder how you came to that conclusion?" Then as we sit with openness, we will come closer to finding lasting solutions.

This isn't something we can do by our own will. The gospel again offers help. In the first half of the reading, Jesus appears to his followers and breathes on them, like G-d breathing life into the first human. He gifts them with Spirit and in so doing is bringing about a spiritual reset. I believe the issues the crisis is revealing are essentially spiritual. They speak to what we value, and fear, how we feel about aging and other vulnerabilities, how we treat others, including the more-than-human, how we view death. They're big questions, ones we need to approach with hearts and minds open to deeper wisdom, to what the Spirit is calling forth in us and calling forth for us.

Fortunately, we're not the first to face such a crisis. There have been epidemics, pandemics, plagues. And from the struggle came something new. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century as plague swept through England, John Wycliffe self-isolated. He gave us the first English translation of the gospels and his writings planted seeds for the Reformation two centuries later. In the same period, Julian of Norwich became a hermit following the death of her entire family. While in seclusion she had a mystical experience, documented in "Revelations of Divine Love", the earliest surviving English language book written by a woman. In it she speaks how Jesus affirmed "All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well." We are in a similar time and like other crisis moments, this time of danger can be an opportunity for creative inspiration and spiritual insight.

As I said at the beginning of this reflection, we are one week into the Easter Season. For once I am glad it is fifty days long. Given everything, I know that for me it will take more than a week for the spirit of the season to take hold. In the meantime, may we sit with the questions. Then as we listen to the Spirit, within and between us, we will live into the answers we need. May it be so. Amen.