

**John 19:19-20**  
**"A Banner Day"**

April 26, 2020  
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It should have been a day of rejoicing and celebration. It should have been a day to get all the friends and family together, to hire a caterer, to get the house and yard all spruced up, to hang-up a banner: "Congratulations Jesus, You Made It!" After all, he had been through an enormous ordeal. It wasn't finals week of senior year, but it was pretty close. In the past week, Jesus had pulled a few all-nighters. He had stayed up in the garden praying to God to give him a way out. When God didn't, Jesus decided that going to Jerusalem, standing before Pilate, getting beaten and crucified, must be God's way out. He had lived his life on the side of the poor and forsaken; now he would also die on their side.

After he was crucified, they took his body down from the cross and buried it in a borrowed tomb. Mary didn't have any money with which to give him a proper funeral, so this was the best they could do. On the day they buried him, there was no service really, and no one could have gone even if there was one. For it was already late in the day on the Sabbath. The sun had gone down, work was over. So the next morning, while it was still dark outside, Mary and a few of her friends—you know the ones—when your son dies tragically and suddenly, your best girlfriends all move in with you to cook for you, to pull your hair back from your soggy face, to make sure you don't stay in bed all day—they are the ones who went to the tomb in the wee hours of the morning. They're going to stage a funeral of their own making—anoint the body with spices, say a few prayers. But when they get there, the stone that had covered up the entrance to the tomb has been rolled away and the body, the dead body of their beloved Jesus, is missing.

They had come to do the only thing left to them to do. No, it's not what they wanted—a funeral with barely anyone in attendance, but it's what there was. If they couldn't have their Jesus, at least they could have their grief. But now even that has been taken away.

It should have been a banner day. Instead, Mark says it fills the women with terror, fear, and amazement. They flee the scene in silence. John says it makes them fall down on the spot and weep.

On the far side of Easter, we may wonder at their reaction. We see the stone rolled away, we hear Jesus has been raised, and we put on our Sunday best, buy up all the lilies and tulips at the nursery, and sing every Alleluia in the hymnbook. So what are the women doing fleeing and weeping? And why are the grown men hiding away behind locked doors? For heaven's sake, it's Easter!

John says they are hiding out for fear of the Jews. If we have said it once, we've said it a thousand times before, this means the disciples are hiding out for fear of their own shadow. Specifically, it was the Jewish leaders under Caiaphas the High Priest who joined ranks with Rome to take down Jesus. When John says "Jews" he may have Caiaphas in mind. Caiaphas certainly was a powerful man worth fearing, but typically when John means Caiaphas he says Caiaphas. Here, he uses a more universal designation of just "Jew," which I think is John's way of telling us you don't have to look far to find someone or something to fear. In fact, sometimes all you have to do is look in the mirror. Because most of the people who made up the known world at that time were Jews, including the disciples. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century, Jews were those who, along with many non-Jews, lived under the oppressive occupying power of Rome. Jews were those who, like Jesus, loved their temple and traditions. Jews were those who loved Jesus and his revolutionary teachings, calling him Rabbi, and they were those who feared Jesus and his revolutionary teachings, calling for his head.

John doesn't say exactly which Jews the disciples are hiding out from, but we can imagine it's every fellow Jew who might now try to tell the disciples, "We told you so. We told you this was how it was going to end for Jesus, but you didn't believe us."

We know that when Jesus called the disciples 3 years earlier, he called several sets of brothers: James and John, the sons of Zebedee, and Simon Peter and his brother Andrew, and together they went off to follow Jesus. But how many brothers didn't go off together? Have you ever stopped to think about how many brothers were divided over the call? In how many families did one say, "I'm going with him," and the other said, "If you go with

him, if you leave the family behind for Jesus, I'll never speak with you again." How many brothers are now sitting on opposite sides of the same door on Easter, hiding out in fear of one another?

The basis of the story for the disciples some 2,000 years ago is quite different from the basis of our own story today, but it would be hard to miss all that is not different. The disciples were driven inside to isolate out of fear of one another. We have been driven inside to isolate hopefully more out of safety and concern for one another, but the fear is also very much a part of us. And this fear and isolation has meant that, despite there still being good news in the world, we are not feeling it any more than the disciples did. The disciples had the stone rolled away and news that Jesus was alive again, but still they were rolled up behind a locked door. Seniors will graduate high school this year, couples will get married, and humanity will do its best to mark these occasions still with great pomp and circumstance, but there will be no big parties, the grandparents won't be there to take pictures, and without seeing these things happen it will almost be hard to believe they've happened at all.

This past week, I officiated my first funeral since the beginning of this pandemic. It was a graveside service not for anyone who is a part of our church community but for someone who is part of our Cumberland community. I knew before arriving at the cemetery that the rule was there could be no more than 5 family members present, everyone must stand 6 feet apart, and you must also wear a face mask. When we got there, though, there were 7 family members. Honestly, the deceased had only 7 people in his family—2 sons, 2 daughters-in-law, and 3 grandsons. I think they figured that 2 more people wasn't going to be a deal breaker on a sunny day when we could all stand 15 feet apart if need be. Plus, like Mary, they weren't going to get any kind of formal funeral for their loved one. They couldn't even be there when he died. All they had was their shared grief. It's all there was.

The Funeral Director—bless his heart—sighed when he saw them. "I'm sorry, but we can't." The family was so understanding and 2 of the grandsons said, "We'll sit in the car." I said, "When the service begins, it will only be 10 minutes long, I'll remove my facemask and

talk loudly so you can hear things still.” But it was a windy day and I had to keep my mask on, which meant my words all came out sounding muffled.

I thought about Jesus coming in on the disciples and how John says he breathed the Holy Spirit on them. It’s the most original and powerful sign of life we have. When a baby is born, we know it’s alive not because we can see it, but because we can hear its breathing cry. And when someone dies, we know they are gone when we can no longer hear them breathing.

When Jesus breathed his own breath on the disciples, he was not only showing them that he was the real deal—not dead, but a living, breathing being, he was also showing them that things are not dead and done for them, either. And when he let Thomas put his finger in the nail mark of his hand, it was to show him that there is another side to being wounded; it is healing. And there is another side to death; it is life. And there is another side to isolation and fear; it is forgiveness and freedom. Yes, there is another side to every door.

But we are not there yet. And I knew it, standing at the cemetery this past week, I knew we were still on this side of the door. I couldn’t take off my facemask and breathe on anyone. I couldn’t make it safe for more than 5 people to gather at a time, and I couldn’t roll away the gravestone that now held down their loved one.

What we could do, though, was move closer to the cars in which the 2 grandsons sat with their windows rolled up. So that’s what we did. Me, the funeral director, and the five family members all went and stood about 20 feet away from the cars, half-way between the grandsons and the casket, half-way between death and life.

My friends, we may not be on the other side of the door yet. But the good news is, it’s on this side of the door, on this side of fear and isolation, of death and doubt, where resurrection happens, where a wounded Jesus shows up announcing “Peace, peace be with you.”

After the service, I asked one of the grandsons if he could hear anything I said. "No," he told me, "but I was able to see what I needed to hear."

On this day, as the wounded Jesus comes among us, on this side of our doors, may you be able to see what you need to hear. Amen.