

CMCL
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John 20:19-31

Today's passage picks up right where we left off last Sunday at Easter. When it says, "and it was evening on that day," "that day" was Easter – the day that the empty tomb was discovered, and in John, the day that Mary sees Jesus alive and runs to tell the rest of the disciples. Their response to the good news? To lock themselves up in a room. It is in this room that Jesus seeks out and finds them.

We're going to freeze the action for a minute: so, in your mind's eye, think of this Bible story as a YouTube video. Jesus has just stepped into a locked room to join his fearful disciples – aaaand hit PAUSE. Open a new tab on your mental browser, and open Netflix on this tab with me. Now imagine clicking on a new show called, "Nailed it!"

"Nailed it!" is playing off the reality that many of us save, print or make mental note of things we've seen online that looked so neat that we thought to ourselves – I'm gonna try that! I.e.: *"For my girlfriend's birthday, surely I can DIY a scale reproduction of the Taj Mahal in butter cream frosting, just like they did in that picture!"*

There are thousands of self-proclaimed and documented failures to reproduce the Taj Mahal in butter cream, and they have a name: "Pinterest fails." People post their failed attempts (usually with the self-awareness that they're failed attempts), for public amusement. The idea of "Nailed it!" is to bring in ordinary people and have them in a timed competition with one another to try to replicate something impossibly cool. As you might guess, their creations are generally hilariously inconsistent with their goals. But, the host always proclaims to the contestant, no matter how unrecognizable the fruits of their labor: "Nailed it!" You'd think the phrase "nailed it" would mean hitting the nail on the head – you *really* got it! On this show, it's an ironic way of saying exactly the opposite.

So now, let's switch back to the first tab in your browser and hit "resume play" on the story of the disciples, quivering in a room on Easter evening. Jesus finds his disciples, who responded to Mary's witness of the resurrection *not* by running out to look for him, but by hiding. And his response to *them*, is to go to them, even though they didn't seek him out? "Peace be with you," he says. And he shows them his wounded hands and his wounded side. And a second time he says, "Peace be with you." Then he goes on: "As the Father sent me, I send you." And he breathes on them ... and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. And if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

And here's where our ancient and modern-day tabs come together. Because the word translated into English as "sin" here, is the Greek work *hamartia*. *Hamartia* means, essentially, to miss the mark or target. To "nail it" or not to "nail it" – that's what sin is about. Notice the context: that Jesus has just walked in on a group of people who have missed the mark on an intergalactic scale. They've spent the week before his death and resurrection ignoring Jesus' warnings, worried about who's greatest, who'll be first in the kingdom of heaven, betraying him, falling asleep on him, denying him, giving up hope for him, not believing hope when it's told to them by a first-hand witness and hiding themselves away in fear.

But Jesus' response is to move toward them, to seek them and find them, in the place of their fear; hiding in their "sin." He does not chastise them, or ask them a thing. He says, "Peace be with you ..." and he shows them his wounds. The very things that, by the judgment of the world, and perhaps even by the judgment of the disciples at that point – marked Jesus' own failure as Messiah, as son of God, the marks that showed that he had suffered and been nailed to a cross.

This is the posture Jesus is modeling, of how you greet a friend who is living in "sin," who has missed, or is currently missing, the mark. It is in this context, from this posture, that he talks about the forgiveness (or non-forgiveness) that we have the power to offer one another. His words to them strongly bring to mind to me (and I'm guessing would have done so to many readers or hearers of the Gospels over the centuries) the Lord's prayer, as Jesus is recorded to have taught the disciples in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." While Jesus is saying, you will have the power to forgive or not, he's also echoing the reminder that you, too, will need the forgiveness of these same folks who will be at the mercy of your forgiveness.

Historically, the church has often read such verses as these: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven, and if you retain the sins of any, they are retained," and interpreted it as: "Oh, wow! Whatever we think is right, God will agree with and make it so. We have the power to judge, and to make others suffer by our judgment."

But notice what Jesus gave the disciples that day, along with this teaching about forgiveness: the Spirit. I read it more as an acknowledgment, a caution, a warning: "I'm giving you the Spirit, because community is a powerful thing. What you do in community will have vast implications for those at the receiving end of your community's discernment. So, don't take this lightly. *You will need the Spirit to do this.*"

If sin is about missing a target, I hear Jesus saying: "You have the power to move the target for one another. But remember: this can be used for good and it can be used for ill. However it's used, it is a powerful thing. Again, *not* to be done lightly."

There might have been a time when I would have said: Dearly beloved, the moral of this story is that we should always move the target for one another, for we will all miss the mark from time to time. Like a game of catch, the point is to keep the ball in play. Part of the fun is to run and leap and dive to catch the ball, however poor the toss. I'm eternally grateful for the many times and ways that my poor tosses have been heroically caught by my community, yelling, "Nailed it!" all the while both of us knowing that it was far from nailing it. And I hope that I, and the faith communities of which I am ever a part, will strive to be people that both work on tossing well, but also on playfully and generously catching each other's tosses when they go awry.

But I think there's a caution, too ... A community that is too insular, can get too caught up in this game of catch – going so far out of the way to move the target for each other that we lose track of where the target should be. I have found myself doing this sometimes – hearing genuine recognition and confession from someone and thinking I'm being kind to say, "No, really, you didn't miss the mark – you nailed it!" Or repeatedly moving the target for an individual or group who are, as far as my understanding would say, actually way off the mark in some area, and never calling them on it because "they're good people in so many other ways." I think of the ways that misogyny and racism and classism flourish in our communities when we don't lovingly but insistently help each other to hit the target, instead of permissively looking the other way, or moving the target for them in such a way that they may never even see the target.

It can be very scary to be in the presence of a powerful person who is missing the mark and to just let them miss it, instead of doing the work for them of moving the target. I think people in power very often expect others to do this kind of labor for them--to laugh, or justify, or rationalize, or otherwise move the target.

One of the ways I also find myself doing this target-moving, is that I am very generous in moving the target for others if it's an area I know myself to be struggling in. I'm not going to call someone else for missing a mark if it's one that I don't want to be called out for. Whereas, I might be more self-righteous and less forgiving about someone missing the mark if it's a target I consistently hit the bull's eye on.

Let's return to our Gospel story – where Thomas finally enters. He's been inexplicably absent, and I wonder how the disciples felt about that ... did they judge him for showing up late to the party? One thing I notice is that Thomas's famous confession that he'll need to see Jesus himself to believe the news of the resurrection was actually made to his fellow disciples. He never makes this confession to Jesus, although the story implies that Jesus knew.

It's a week later when Jesus comes to them all again, and this time, Thomas is there. And Jesus does for Thomas exactly what he did for the others. Without prompting, he says: "Peace be with you." Also again, without being asked by Thomas, Jesus voluntarily shows him his wounds.

Jesus is equally gracious to all of them for the particular ways they missed the target: the ten who missed the target due to fear, and the one who missed the target due to doubt. Both times, Jesus shows them the target, not by feeding some delusion that they'd "Nailed it!" but by completely accepting them where they were, and leading them to the bull's eye, with his own wounds in full view.

My guess is that the reason we have often judged Thomas by a harsher standard than the rest of the disciples (this passage is known as the story of Doubting Thomas, after all, not the story of the Fearful Disciples) is that the church has historically been far harsher on doubt than fear; and we still are. How much we allow from one another – how quick we are to move the target for one another when fear is the motivation (perceived or real). We see this defense often in police brutality incidents: if they're shown to have felt fear, then almost anything they do in response is justified.

Where does the target – and missing or "nailing it" intersect with CMCL's focus on reminding one another we are known and loved by God? How do we offer each other genuine peace – Christ's peace – in our instances of poor aim, remembering that Jesus' example includes reassurance in the midst of doubt and fear *while always keeping the target in mind*, and gently but persistently leading us toward it. How do we help each other un-ironically "nail it" in ways that are *really* important—life and death important—to our community, to our world and to our souls?