

Dreaming of the Sacred, Waking to Ourselves (John 20.19-31)
Jeremy Rutledge, Covenant Church
April 15, 2007

Do you ever wake from a dream so vivid that you are, for a moment, disoriented? Do you ever sit up in the bed with the feeling of the dream still fresh? Do you ever rise before the sun, put on a bathrobe, and walk outside with the images from the dream following you? Do you ever stand there, waiting for dawn, hearing whispers from your dream on the breeze? Do you ever watch the horizon with sleepy eyes, as the dreaming world converges with the waking one, and the darkness and the light are met in the coming of a new day? Do you ever wonder how to hold on to your dream, how to carry it with you from the quiet of morning into the hum of activity that is your life? Do you ever wake from a dream so vivid that you are, for a moment, disoriented?

One of the most evocative characteristics of our sacred stories is their oftentimes dreamy quality. Page after page, chapter after chapter, they speak of visions and appearances, of spirits and voices, and of characters who wake from their slumber to become somehow transformed. And when we read our sacred stories more figuratively than literally, it is possible for each of us to enter them in a deeply personal manner, hearing the themes of their myths and metaphors or, to put it another way, the wisdom of their dreams, as it applies to our own lives and experiences. This is as it should be. For our sacred stories were not written in order to remain static. They were not given so that we would have a dusty old book of ancient narratives no longer relevant. They were not kept as a journal of long ago dreams that bear no relationship to the present morning. Instead, they have been passed to us so that we might continue to interpret them and engage them and wrestle with the meanings of their dreamy wisdom in our own days. In

order to consider such dreamy wisdom, we need look no further than this morning's lection. It contains a haunting reading from the Book of John, wherein Jesus is said to appear to his friends after his death in a way that seems somehow comforting and disorienting at the same time.

As the story goes, some time after Jesus has died his friends are gathered in a house where they have locked themselves for fear of the religious authorities. We might remember that most of the male disciples fled after the rabbi was condemned to die, and here we find them again in their hiding place. John's gospel has only just begun to offer images of a risen Jesus. In the verses that precede this morning's reading we are told that the rabbi made a first appearance to Mary Magdalene as she wept outside his tomb. And in today's text we hear that the male disciples share an experience or a vision of Jesus. According to the narrative, although the doors of the house where they were staying were locked, the rabbi appears in the midst of his friends and greets them with a certain word. "Peace be with you," he says to them, and he follows with a very strange act. He shows them his own wounds. This is a highly symbolic gesture, and, if we read it figuratively we can consider its depth. What does it mean exactly, that the rabbi Jesus appears to his friends and they see his hurt, his pain, and his brokenness? Why are these the things that he chooses to share or that the gospel writer is so careful to record? These aren't questions we may be able to answer just now, but we should at least let them hang over the story. For here Jesus shows up, in his usual style, not in glory so much as in curiosity. He is seen not in his power but in its strange absence. He does not ever really play the conquering hero – he didn't do it Palm Sunday and he's not doing it now – he just emerges in a sort of strange simplicity, shows his wounds to his friends, and whispers

some words about peace and the spirit and the importance of finding forgiveness. There is more than enough here for us to reflect on, but, as John tells it, there is another character that we need to consider. His name is Thomas, and when the other disciples tell him that they have had this experience of Jesus he won't hear a word of it.

Again, as the story goes, when his friends try to tell him that they have seen the rabbi, Thomas does not believe them. In one of the more well-known lines from the gospels, he says rather emphatically that unless he sees Jesus for himself and can touch his wounded hands and side, he isn't buying their story. And for this Thomas has been branded ever since as "doubting Thomas." Thomas the skeptic, Thomas the person of little faith, Thomas the near villain who cannot accept what he has not experienced. But if you're like me at all, then you might take a different view of him. For many of us, who heard this story, even as children, thought that Thomas actually made a lot of sense. In our own minds, he just sounded like an honest person. Why should he take on faith some claim that others were making that did not fit his understanding or his experience? And why should he be lampooned for expressing his doubts in earnest? Some of us would say that expressing our doubts is a vital part of what it means to be religious. Some of us would ask, alongside Thomas, how it is possible to speak of ultimately meaningful things without a critical level of honesty. Some of us would stick up for Thomas by valuing the search implied in his questions – the personal search to experience what is sacred for himself. As one such Thomas sympathizer, I'd simply like to say that I read him as a healthy skeptic. He is a skeptic insofar as he will not accept what others say without needing to examine it himself. But he is healthy because he seems to retain a sense of openness. And we see this as the story unfolds.

As John tells it, a week after Thomas makes his doubts known, the rabbi Jesus makes another appearance among his friends. This time he comes to Thomas specifically and wishes him what he had first wished the others, peace. Then, we are told, Jesus offers his hands and his side to Thomas so that his wounds can be seen by the one who has voiced such reservation. Thomas is said to acknowledge Jesus, having experienced his presence, and then the gospel writer includes an exhortation from the rabbi that seems rather directly intended for the hearers and readers of the story. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” At first blush, this sounds very much like a reproach to Thomas and to any of us who go around saying what exactly it is that we are unable to believe. Indeed, interpreting this statement as a sort of chastisement is still commonly done in churches far and wide. But it is possible for those of us who really value our doubts to hear these words a little differently.

One of the doubts that we in the liberal tradition commonly share is the oft-mentioned doubt in the literal accuracy of our sacred stories. We don’t tend to read stories like this as exact historical accounts of activities that happened once a very long time ago. We tend to read them as metaphorical narratives that hint at the deeply human questions, longings, and dreams that we all share. With this idea in mind, we might hear a bit less chiding in the rabbi’s words and a bit more invitation. For it is not necessary for us to interpret his words to mean “Blessed are those who believe things they can’t really believe,” or “Blessed are those who repress their honest questions,” or “Blessed are those who require no evidence or experience or anything but simply take all on blind faith.” We might instead choose to hear the rabbi addressing something just under the surface, something at which we hinted when this proclamation began. We might hear him

whispering an encouragement more relevant to us. “Blessed are those who will let their dreams follow them even when they have not yet been realized.” “Blessed are those who ask questions about what it means to live between the ideal and the real.” “Blessed are those who rise early in search of experience and greet every new day with an openness to what it might bring them...or what they might bring it.”

And here we might come full circle for a moment and consider a rather unorthodox and dreamy interpretation of the story of Jesus’ appearance to Thomas. What if the appearance of which we are told, what if the vision had by the disciples, what if the words that were whispered and the image that haunts were a dream? What if Thomas was dreaming of his friend who had died, the rabbi Jesus that he loved and missed, appearing in his unconscious to wish him peace and give him courage? What if this isn’t quite a story of superhuman resurrection so much as it is a story of our most heartfelt human longings—the longing for our friends who have gone, the remembrance of the things they said and did, the acknowledgement of their still powerful hold, and the wish to honor their memories with our days? One way of reading this story is to read it as a dream that haunted Thomas for the rest of his life. For it is to the rest of life that dreams call us, anyway.

If we were to share with Thomas a dream of the rabbi, then we would also need to share with him a way of being that reflected the dream. According to Christian tradition, after Thomas had his experience or vision he traveled farther than any of Jesus’ friends, carrying the rabbi’s teachings of love and peace and forgiveness. Legend says that Thomas made it all the way to India, and you can still find Thomistic Christian communities there today following very ancient rules attributed to the famous “doubter.”

But whatever really happened to Thomas, the old Book of John suggests that he was simply changed somehow by his understanding of the way Jesus came to him. And while some in the Christian tradition will always believe that the rabbi's appearance was a literal event and others will maintain it was a figurative account, the question of higher import seems to be, as always, the question of response. The question that we might take with us today is much more concerned with how we might translate the dreams and longings of our religion into practice and experience every day.

This is where I, as a preacher, simply need to leave it to you. I am working out my own answers to the questions about how I understand Jesus' teachings and what they might mean—about loving the earth and each other, forswearing violence in all of its forms, learning how to make peace, caring especially for the poor, and recognizing what is broken and wounded within myself as I search for and work toward forgiveness—but the rabbi may have come to you in different ways and whispered some other dreamy wisdom. And perhaps the message in Thomas, the message in any of our dreams, is meant to help us bridge the strange divide between the worlds of the ideal and the real. Perhaps what Thomas is really trying to tell us is that it is possible for our dreams to be realized. Our work, then, is to ask ourselves how we will make it so this day, in the here and now. So, on this day, in the here and now, we might just ask ourselves again...

Do you ever wake from a dream so vivid that you are, for a moment, disoriented? Do you ever sit up in the bed with the feeling of the dream still fresh? Do you ever rise before the sun, put on a bathrobe, and walk outside with the images from the dream following you? Do you ever stand there, waiting for dawn, hearing whispers from your dream on the breeze? Do you ever watch the horizon with sleepy eyes, as the dreaming

world converges with the waking one, and the darkness and the light are met in the coming of a new day? Do you ever wonder how to hold on to your dream, how to carry it with you from the quiet of morning into the hum of activity that is your life? Do you ever wake from a dream so vivid...

On this day may our dreams follow us out.