



“WE’RE STILL HERE”
SCRIPTURE: JOHN 20: 19-31
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
LIVE-STREAMED WORSHIP
Sunday, April 19, 2020
The Rev. Dr. Marcia W. Mount Shoop, Pastor

(MMS trying to get out of the zoom box.)

SGB: Marcia, are you ok? It’s time for your sermon!

RRC: Do you think I should text, John, and tell him to check on Marcia? (RRC is asking SGB)

MMS: I’m sorry, Richard and Samantha, I want out of this box. When we started this whole virtual worship thing, I never dreamed it would come to this! I’ve never been good at staying in boxes. And now this is our life.... these darn Zoom boxes. It’s like we’re in the twilight zone and we’re all stuck in the opening Brady Bunch song. “Here’s a story of GCPC.” (Jeff plays the theme song)

RRC: Marcia, Marcia, Marcia!

SGB: Hold on a second, Richard, I know what Marcia means—I mean about the boxes.

MMS: Thank you, Samantha!

SGB: But the whole Brady Bunch thing is a little before my time!

MMS: Ok, ok, it was a really popular show in the 70s. But really! I mean aren’t you both tired of being one-dimensional. I miss being three-dimensional.

RRC: Yeah, remember when we use to preach sermons and walk around the sanctuary?

SGB: Remember how we would ask people questions in the congregation?

MMS: Yeah, that’s the stuff I miss. Now I’m just in this little box and I can’t see anyone’s faces out there. Over a month at home and we’re still here—in little Zoom boxes.

(RRC and SGB disappear)

MMS: Richard, Samantha? Where’d they go? Well I guess it’s just me and my little Zoom box. I’ve got to trust you all are out there! I’ve got to trust that we’re all still here, together, even if these Zoom boxes are the best we’ve got for now!

When I was in college, I worked very, very hard to not deal with the pain and trauma I had experienced in my teenage years. I stayed extremely busy. I had a hard time being alone. I couldn't be in the quiet. I could not. If I was by myself, I had to have some sound going all the time. Silence left me tortured by thoughts, memories, shame. So, I avoided silence and, when I could, I avoided being alone.

Some of us are more resistant than others to the necessity of dealing with our own issues, our own stuff. But all of us find ways to distract, to avoid, to deflect, to project, to defend. And then we wonder why the same things keep happening to us over and over again. The short answer is because we're still here.

No matter where you go, you're there.

That's what I learned in all of our moving around the country all those years that John was coaching in the NFL and then in college football. You can think the grass is always greener in a new town, a new house, a new life. And that if you just go somewhere and start over, you won't have to deal with the issues you'd rather avoid. But you get there to the new place and realize you're still you. And any issues you've been trying to avoid or deny, well they follow you.

Finally I realized that wherever I moved, I was there—the issues were mine to deal with if I didn't want my life to be a broken record.

I guess we're pretty much learning that about a lot of things these days, huh? Wherever we are, we're still here.

All of us are. Our issues are ours wherever we are. And we come to moments in our life where they demand that we deal with them. And lots of us are at one of those times.

The stress points in our relationships get harder to deny because we can't get any distance from them. The projects we've been putting off around the house are now confronting us every second of the day saying "what's your excuse now?" If we've been trying to outrun complicated inner feelings we've been having, there's nowhere to hide.

We're still here, wanting to relieve the tension, maybe even struggling to be with ourselves or struggling to listen to what the universe wants us to learn.

Right now we are hearing that the world needs less of us—that means a lot of painful things, and it's hard to hear. The world needs less human activity, less consumption and production. The world needs less human contact. The world needs

less greed and less white supremacy. The world needs less short sightedness. The world needs less individualism. The world needs less entitlement.

And even so, if the pandemic miraculously ended today, what would have changed about us. What would have changed about you and me, about the daily lives we live?

Whether we're in a pandemic or in our previous lives, we're still here unless we are ready to deal with the issues that we keep cycling through over and over again, and that can keep us trapped in our little boxes.

Jesus doesn't need an open door or even an unlocked door. He finds a way to come in to the locked doors of our psyche and our soul. He knows the truth about us, about our interior lives. And the hardest part for us to believe is that he knows all of those things and he loves us fiercely—not in spite of who we are but because of who we are.

Imagine Jesus walks right into your stay at home/stay safe life and gives you exactly what you need to believe that the world will change, that you can change, that you can believe?

The ones who had been with Jesus and through it all with Jesus weren't exactly the models of courage and faith after his resurrection. Even though Mary Magdalene had told them she had seen the Lord. Even though some of them had seen the empty tomb, they are still locked in a room, they are still afraid.

They are afraid of violence, they are afraid of ridicule, they are afraid of confrontation, they are afraid of unknowns.

The door is locked, but he comes right in. And without even being asked, he shows his friends his wounds. And they rejoice! He breathes the Holy Spirit on them and tells them they have the power to reconcile, to repair broken relationships, to alleviate shame and estrangement, to heal the ruptures of their communities.

But a week later, they are still in that same room. And while there's a chance the door's not locked, it's still closed. And Jesus comes back. Same entrance. Same invitation. This time to Thomas, the one who had missed the first go round.

Thomas gets a bad rap, but he doesn't need anything different than what all of his friends got. He wanted to see Jesus for himself. They got to see the wounds; he wanted to see them.

Jesus doesn't come in and scold Thomas for wanting to see for himself. He comes in and without even being asked he shows Thomas his hands and his side. He meets Thomas where he is and gives him what he needs.

And it is in meeting Thomas where he is that we get the strongest confession of faith in all of scripture, "My Lord and My God."

And Jesus then opens the door to all believers who will come after Thomas and he tells us we can believe God is that close to us, that able to meet us where we are, even if we don't get to be in the room where it happened.

Many years ago, I learned to love being alone, being still, being quiet. I embraced the mystery, the emptiness, even the pain. Instead of avoiding my feelings I needed to let them speak to me. I needed to believe that God would meet me exactly where I really was.

And when I was going full throttle with life as the Pastor/Head of Staff at GCPC pre-pandemic, I was missing that stillness, that quiet. And try as I might to work it into my schedule, it rarely happened.

I've been reminded once again that wherever I am, I am here. And wherever I am, God is here inviting me to embrace healing opportunities that will keep cycling back through my life until I am ready to truly change.

The same goes for all of us. Wherever we are, we're still here. And the issues that have been asking to be dealt with are still here!

America's issues are still here, asking to be acknowledged, asking to be addressed. The issues that have defined our problems, our pathologies as a country are still here.

And trying to deny them, conceal them, ignore them, discount them, put a Band-Aid on them—all of those strategies are just making the problems worse. And this pandemic is not even subtle about telling us these things.

The optics of this country's denial are getting more grotesque, more extreme, more dangerous. How much longer will we let white supremacy and greed drive our culture and our political decision-making? Are we as a country finally ready for something new?

As people of faith, we are the ones who should know it's way past time for us to trust that God will meet us where we are and give us what we need to embrace a more life-giving way of being together.

We just need the courage to truly see ourselves—wounds and all. For healing to happen, we have to see our wounds for what they are—they are the cost of our collective denial and avoidance around the culture of white supremacy that has told us we are defined by the revenue we generate.

To the white people clamoring to reopen the economy, I and many of my siblings in faith believe that God wants more for you, better for you than an economy that relies on you being gas lighted by a President who doesn't care about your family, or my family, or any of the people who will be harmed if we continue to prioritize the economy over the well being of all people.

When the President tweets about your liberation, he is really grasping at his desire for you to keep him in power so that he can continue to benefit financially from your delusion. Like an abusive spouse or parent, he likes it when you are weak; he likes it when you are afraid, and he likes it when you are vulnerable and when you think you can't make it without him.

I know because I've been there, in that abusive cycle of fear and dependence and gas lighting. He's no good for you; he's no good for us! It's not even good for him—but we'll trust God is working on him, somehow, someday because I don't think any of us can touch that.

To the white people storming state houses and calling for economies to open back up, know that you have tapped into an eerie echo from our country's past of white mobs demanding what they want while willfully ignoring and denying the generations of violence and terror that people of color have endured to make this economy only work for a few.

You are getting away with behavior that is not serving you or anyone else, and you are getting away with it because a few powerful people like what you are helping to prop up.

To the white people storming state houses without social distancing, without regard for what scientists and doctors and nurses and public health experts are telling us, many of us can hear our country's woundedness in your voices and in your self-destruction.

We can hear the cost of our country's denial in your voices; we can see it in your angry faces. You have been used. We all have. And your anger is misdirected. This pandemic isn't a fake crisis. It's the latest crisis that is trying to wake us all up to ourselves.

And we're still here.

Our American family and our planet earth family really need ALL of us to believe in something better than what we've got right now.

We're still here. All of us. Still in the same place. Cycling back through this old pathological pain. And the same people will pay the price for our collective denial.

Our brokenness can only be healed if we all can find our way back to the common good we share—we need each other, we need everyone to have a real chance at living lives that aren't about running scared but are about being at home with ourselves and truly at peace with each other.

Jesus is with us in the little boxes we find ourselves in these days—he can cross through the locks and the doors we try to shut tight. He is breathing on us, giving us what we need to heal broken relationships with ourselves, with each other, with our stuff, with our culture, with our bodies, with our God and our world.

Zoom boxes and all, we're still here—all of us, together, trying again to trust that we're ready for healing that meets us exactly where we are.

Thanks be to God.