

So I Send You

Meditation on John 20:19-31

April 8, 2018

Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

¹⁹ When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

²⁶ A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. (Pause) Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹ But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Journalist Ken Fine wanders Hillsborough Street in Raleigh, NC, feeling sad about his girlfriend of 5 years breaking up with him.

Then, the sound of a Mozart concerto prompted him to raise his eyes, he writes in a January 2017 article for *Indyweek*. "There he was. A heavy-set man with shoulder-length hair, the brown curls showing signs of gray....The violin under his chin and the bow in his hand were worn. I'd seen him before, playing that same instrument: on Franklin Street in Chapel Hill as a young boy, my hand in my mother's as we walked to Pepper's Pizza for a pregame slice; on Durham's Ninth Street as a teenager, cutting it up with friends.... He was a constant to thousands of kids like me, who'd grown up in the Triangle.

"In the 20 minutes I sat there listening to him—this man I didn't know, but who wasn't quite a stranger—on that stormy February afternoon in 2008, I was reminded of happier times. Reminded that life, even in its worst moments, was full of possibility. Full of hope.

"When the wind picked up and the sky darkened, I turned to leave. The music stopped. Suddenly I was overcome by emotion, tears welling up in my eyes. The fiddler placed a soft hand on my shoulder.

"You gonna be OK?" he asked.

"I think so," I replied.

"Well, I know so," he said, a half-smile forming on the right side of his mouth. "How about one more song for the road?"

Most people didn't know the violinist's name or story or how mental illness led to him choosing a life on the streets. How when he played his violin was the only time he felt peace. He never asked for money.... Never had "ill words for passersby," Ken says. Business owners appreciated his presence outside their storefronts. The town affectionately called David McKnight the *Franklin Street Fiddler*, the *Mayor of Ninth Street*, or *Hillsborough Street's Handel*.

"He was *our* musician," Ken says.

David was born in 1947, the son of civil rights leader and *Charlotte Observer* editor "Pete" McKnight. He didn't pick up the violin until 6th grade but quickly displayed his talent. Smart, charismatic, popular, funny, athletic. In high school, he was voted "most likely to succeed."

During his senior year, he began showing symptoms of mental illness; the diagnosis is unknown. He attended Duke University and played the university mascot, the Blue Devil, on the field. He left school early to travel the world; he would earn a degree later in life. He spoke twelve languages. When he returned home several years later, he became a reporter for *The Durham Morning Herald*, *The News & Observer*, and *The Charlotte Observer*. When he became an editorial writer for *The Fayetteville Observer* in the mid-seventies, he formed a folk band and, for about 5 years, they played at festivals and small venues across the state.

In 1978, he left his job to run for Senate against incumbent Jesse Helms. Though he was just 29 and too young to serve as a Senator, 9,000 people voted for him. His campaign was radical--no fancy clothes or prepared talking points. And no car! He wore out 6 pairs of shoes

walking 1,654 miles across his state with his fiddle, promising voters he wouldn't "fiddle around" in Washington.

He never again held a steady job after losing the election. He refused help from family and friends; refused to take medication, believing it would affect his playing.

Those who walked by as he played his violin, wouldn't likely see that his life, without his knowing it, was a gentle witness to those with so-called "normal" lives --those who were, unlike him, too busy to reach out with kindness and compassion to someone in need.

In our gospel today, we pick up where we left off on Easter--after the risen Christ appears to Mary Magdalene in the morning, and Mary runs to tell the disciples, "I have seen the Lord!" That night, Jesus appears to the disciples--minus Thomas-- huddled in fear behind locked doors. My first response is, "Guys, didn't you hear what Mary said?!"

But that's the whole point of this passage--that only those who see Jesus and hear him speak to them personally believe in His resurrection. The male disciples need even more proof of his identity than Mary; they need to see the marks on his hands and side. This is John emphasizing that the risen Christ is both human--bearing the scars of his crucifixion in his flesh--and divine; locked doors fail to keep Jesus out when he wants to enter a room! Thomas, a week later, will proclaim his faith with, "My Lord **and My God!**"

The risen Christ brings his fearful, unbelieving disciples what they need to do His work in the world. First, he greets them with His peace, which he has offered before. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you," he tells them in John 14:27. "I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." Then he gives them a gift they must "receive" by faith. He breathes His Spirit on them, bringing to mind God breathing life into humanity, formed from the dust of the earth at Creation. But also, it reminds us of Pentecost in Acts, when the promised Spirit comes as a rushing wind, with tongues of fire, to fill a larger group of disciples gathered in Jerusalem 50 days after the Passover. The Spirit in John 20 will form a new community of believers and empower them to take the message of God's forgiveness to the world, so that all who believe on Him will have "life in his name." "As the Father has sent me," Christ tells his faithful, "so I send you."

And Thomas? Why is he singled out when **none** of the disciples believe until they see for themselves? Thomas, up to now, has been loyal to Jesus. When Christ prepares to return to Bethany to his friend, Lazarus, who is dying in John 11, Thomas is the only one who doesn't try to talk him out of it. "Let us also go," he says to the other disciples, "that we may die with him."

He speaks for all the disciples when he says in John 14 that they don't understand what Jesus is talking about ---going to "prepare a place for them." He says, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"

I think Thomas is every follower of Christ. We declare our love and commitment to the Lord one minute and struggle with fear and doubt the next. But Christ pursues us, like he does Thomas, who honestly declares his unbelief--not in Jesus, but that Jesus has risen from the dead. The truth is that the risen Christ is always with us, but, like the first disciples, we don't always recognize him. We expect a glorious king, when Jesus tells us in Matthew 25 that he is the stranger we invite in, the poor, hungry and thirsty person we feed and clothe, and the one who is sick or in prison that we visit. That when we are serving people in need, we are serving him.

Eventually, the people of Charlotte figure out that David McKnight, the homeless violinist, has given the community a precious gift when he shares himself and his music with them for 30 years, expecting nothing in return. But it takes him getting sick. He was diagnosed with cancer in November 2016. Ken, after hearing about the inoperable brain tumor, decides to finally thank him for his kindness on that stormy night in Feb. 2008--when David played Dylan's *Blowin' in the Wind* and his gentle words lifted him. Ken was reminded of happier times. That life, even in its worst moments, is full of possibility. Full of hope.

He visited David on Jan. 12, 2017 in a healthcare facility. But he had waited too long. "I don't know if he understood," Ken says. David can only speak in "a mumble, a hodgepodge of sounds that only resemble actual words." His appearance is so changed that Ken doesn't recognize him, at first. His fiddle is stashed behind the bathroom door.

On Jan. 15, 2017, two days before David dies, the community hosts a 3-hour musical tribute for him. More than 200 people come. David is too sick to attend. But it is live-streamed into his hospice room. At the event, someone announces that they are raising money to build a statue of him, violin in hand, to erect on Ninth Street.

They pass a bucket, Ken says, “church-style.” The bucket is full before it makes its way around the hall.

Friends, don't doubt. Believe!

Today is a new day, a fresh beginning for us.

Act kindly. Love boldly. Help others. Share what you have with people in need. Forgive, as God forgives you.

Live faithfully so others may see that you trust in the Messiah, the Son of God, who offers to all who believe life in his name.

“As the Father has sent me,” Christ says to us, “so I send you.”

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we love you and trust in your Son, the Messiah, whom you sent to save us from our sins. Renew us with your Spirit. Pour your peace in our hearts so that we may be peacemakers. Lead us in your loving ways so that we may reveal the new life in your name you offer to all who believe. Help us to acts of creativity, generosity and kindness, especially to people in need. Open our eyes to ways we can help others; give us courage to act. Stir us to forgive as you have so mercifully forgiven us. Use us to work for you and make our community a kinder, gentler, happier place. In Christ we pray. Amen.