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Resurrection Changes

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There is a controversy surrounding C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* series, one of the few series I highly recommend everyone read. It's about the adventures children experience in another world that is on a deeper level, the spiritual journey of faith. The controversy is over the correct order to read and number the 7 books in the Narnia series. Part of the trouble is, C.S. Lewis wasn't envisioning a series of books when he wrote *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*. But after its publication, and positive reception, Lewis went on to write 6 more books that all take place in Narnia and all involve a Lion named Aslan, and all the characters' relationship with Aslan. However, the books do not fit a neat, concise timeline. Some stories take place before the events in the *Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, even though the books were written after its publication.

So the controversy is: should a person read the books in the order Lewis wrote them or in the timeline the books themselves represent? The publishers tried to solve the controversy by publishing the *Chronicles of Narnia* in the timeline order. But there are those of us who own the series with the original sequencing of the order in which the books were written and prefer that order. Both sides have strong arguments supporting their positions.

However, I'm not sure any argument on either side will ever sway or settle the matter completely. This same controversy is passionately debated over other genres too, such as the 9 movies in the Star Wars saga. This past week there was an article in the New Yorker that tackled this issue from another angle: the storytelling angle. The author of the article wrote about how telling stories has changed, and that Aristotle's definitive definition of a story has having a distinct beginning, middle and end, is no longer the accepted norm. Now stories can be rooted in something larger than a single plot, they can be rooted in a world like Lewis's Narnia, Tolkien's Middle Earth, George Lucas' Star Wars galaxy a long time ago and far, far away, and Marvel's and DC's Comic Book and Movie Universes. Fans of any TV series also know that story lines can weave in and out of time. This means stories can be much longer, quite complex, and not have definitive endings. And as the author of New Yorker article states, this different way of telling a story seems to resonate with people.

Maybe because like life, it isn't always so easy to define or identify a beginning, middle or end. Sometimes endings and beginnings are intertwined. Some journeys aren't linear, like the journey of grief that has its good days and bad days and really hard days. Healing, forgiveness, creativity, love, none of these things have simple, linear instructions for making them happen. They are real, and powerful, yet everyone who experiences them will do so differently. Much like faith, believing and trusting in that which we cannot always see. And if we get too consumed with worrying over the proper order of things, we might miss the meaning of the story, or the healing after a loss, the gift of love, or the Risen Christ in our midst.

Which brings us to today's Gospel reading where, if we look closely, we can see that journey play out for one of Jesus' followers, a man named Thomas. Last Sunday we heard about Mary Magdalene and her journey from grieving to believing, today we have Thomas, whose journey is different. Interwoven in his journey, we also have the Risen Jesus on the move, and can begin to see what he is getting up to.

Today's Gospel starts on the evening of that first Easter day. After Mary Magdalene's announcement of her experience with the Risen Jesus, we hear the disciples are in a room behind a locked door, only not all of them were there. Thomas was missing. We don't know why. Some say he was running an errand. Others wonder if he was hiding somewhere else. Still others say he had had it; when he realized Jesus was no military genius who was going to start a war, he was out of there. He quit and went back to his old life. Like I said, no one knows. But the point is Thomas missed seeing the Risen Jesus, and how the Risen Jesus somehow has the ability to gently enter into the places where we humans would rather not be bothered. He missed how Jesus commissioned his followers with the work of following the Risen Christ: to receive the Holy Spirit, to share peace - another word for peace is wholeness - and to forgive, to free people from whatever holds them back from living into wholeness, and what the Holy Spirit is calling a person to. The followers of the Risen Jesus are to share with him in the liberating work of God's love, by doing what they can to spark and spread God's love into the world.

But Thomas missed all that. So the disciples went and found him and told him, much like Mary Magdalene told them, "We have seen the Lord." And we heard Thomas wasn't eager to listen to them. There are as many theories why he didn't believe his fellow followers of Jesus as there are as to why Thomas wasn't with them when Jesus showed up the first time. I wonder if the reason Thomas didn't listen to his friends and colleagues is because he didn't want to believe them. Have you ever heard something you didn't want to believe? It could be good or bad, but whatever it was you didn't really want to believe it was really happening, and so called it "unbelievable"? Even if it was just for a few minutes? Something like a tragedy like

the terrorist attacks on 9/11? Or a natural disaster? Or hearing someone you love has an illness? Or died suddenly? Or when friends or parents are getting a divorce? News that indicates a huge shift in your life is about to happen, a shift you may not be ready for, or want to happen, or just don't like. Maybe that is what it was like for Thomas. Maybe he just wasn't ready for what it would mean for him that Jesus was raised from the dead. Maybe he just didn't want to imagine it. Maybe that is why he responded by saying he needed to examine Jesus' wounds for himself to be sure. Maybe Thomas was doing what countless humans have done for countless years: putting something we don't want to believe into a framework we are comfortable with like defining a story as a plot that has a beginning, middle, and end. Like separating science and religion, or math from language. Maybe Thomas was still trying to make Jesus fit into his own construct instead of letting Jesus be the Jesus he is.

Whatever his reason, Thomas was with his friends and colleagues when Jesus appeared again. And like with Mary Magdalene, Jesus seemed to know exactly what Thomas needed. He didn't call Thomas by name, like he did Mary, but he presented Thomas with his wounds. And those wounds are significant; they are what changed Thomas. The Risen Jesus might have a weird way of being able to move through locked doors, but he still has the marks of crucifixion on him. They weren't magically erased, nor was he trying to cover them up. Yet they didn't define him, either. The Risen Jesus did not come back with exaggerated scars stinging with emotional pain that fed acts of revenge. The Risen Jesus came to forgive those who betrayed and abandoned him, to empower his followers to do the same, and to show us God is not in the revenge business. Instead, the Risen Jesus shows us that God sees us, knows us, and is willing to meet us where we are, even if that is in places of pain. The Resurrection does not magically remove pain and suffering from this world, but instead redeems it. Resurrection doesn't force belief or faith, nor does it put those things into easy to understand categories that can be explained or debated. Instead, Resurrection life comes into our lives, walks along with us through our complex journeys, and helps us see where we might live that resurrection life.

The story of Thomas shows us that not everyone comes to faith the same way, and that is okay. It also shows us belief isn't something that can be defined, it is instead more a story to be lived, or a mystery to be engaged. Resurrection probably leads to more questions than it does definitive answers, and that is okay too. Resurrection is more than a plot device that turns an ending into a beginning and a beginning into an ending. Resurrection is new life of Christ with us through all the twists and turns of our life, and can use those twists and turns to break through into this world, where heaven and earth become one.