

Cheri Blauwet uses a wheelchair, and not just to get around. Cheri is a competitive wheelchair racer. “There are days,” she says, “some more than others, when I take leaps of faith.” For instance, “When you see a pothole coming at 35 miles per hour, you just have to close your eyes and pray that you land on the other side.”

Cheri was left paralyzed from the waist down in a farming accident when she was 15 months old. But she grew up being treated like any other kid, and she was raised to be freethinking and independent.¹

There’s something about being freethinking and independent – being true to yourself – that goes a long way when getting past life’s potholes.

The disciples in today’s New Testament lesson are needing to get past a big pothole, so to speak. Or more precisely, a tomb-shaped hole that’s festering in their hearts.

You’ll remember from last week how the women at the empty tomb told them they had encountered the Risen Lord? And how the disciples thought this to be an idle tale, and did not believe them?

Well, now they’re huddled behind a locked door in fear of what the authorities might do to them, as followers of Jesus, Jesus who was crucified, dead and buried, gone forever, or so they thought.

What’s it like to be in a deep, dark hole – spiritually – with no way out, no light in your life to guide you? Some of us get stuck in a hole of loneliness. For others, it’s fear of not being enough. Still others can’t see beyond their past, the wrongs they’ve suffered, the wrongs they’ve committed, the struggles that have beaten them down, the linger pain they feel in their hearts.

And then there are those stuck in a hole of their own making – because they live in denial, denial about who they really are, how well or how poorly they respond to the calling to “do for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine,” as Jesus says.

Wherever you find yourself in this – whether it’s a sense of loneliness, failure, past hurts, personal guilt, spiritual and emotional exhaustion, the pain of loss, or the chasm of living in denial, know that you are not alone. Everyone has been there, even and especially the disciples of Jesus.

¹ Fast Company magazine (September 2004)

Can you imagine how lonely they felt holed up in that empty room, the pain of failure and loss, the weight of guilt thinking they should have done more, or perhaps living in denial, telling themselves they did all they could for Jesus, when they couldn't even stay awake with him in the hours before his arrest?

And that's when the Risen Lord comes to them and says, "Peace be with you." Peace be with you, you who know me so well, you who are fully known by God, and loved just the same, you who are asked now to receive the Holy Spirit, receive my blessing, and use it to bless others.

And to assure them that it's OK, that they're OK, he shows them his hands and his side where the nails and spear pierced his body. Jesus shows them who he truly is – the Risen Lord marred by the brutality of this world, and still able to turn all things toward God's good purpose.

Jesus gets real with his disciples and asks that they get real with him, setting aside what they're hiding behind to stand before him just as they are. And in that moment, they do, they embrace the Lord, rejoicing at the sight of Jesus, body and soul.

But Thomas was not with the other apostles that day. So when later they tell him about it, he says, "I will not believe," I will not believe "unless I see the mark of the nails ... and put my hand in his side."

Now, many people think this shows a weakness in Thomas. But actually, he's just being real with them, expressing his doubt and seeking the truth, rather than just going along with the others.

It takes a lot of courage and strength to stay true to who you are in the midst of doubt and pain. It takes a lot of faith to stand before the Lord and all-the-world just as you are, trusting that it's OK, that the grace and mercy of the Lord is there for you, especially when you come from a place of truth and authenticity.

Take for instance the pastor who managed to stay true to himself when faced by a particularly challenging church family. It seems that two of the brothers in this family were quite evil, and rich. They hid behind their money to make themselves look good and mask their evil ways. To all those at their church, the brothers looked like perfect Christians, except that the pastor could see right through them.

The pastor was right in the middle of a huge fundraising campaign when he heard that one of the brother's had suddenly died. While the remaining brother was meeting with him about the funeral, he handed the pastor a check big enough to cover the entire building campaign. "I have only one condition," he said. "At the funeral, you must say my brother was a saint."

The pastor gave his word, and deposited the check. But the next day at the funeral, he did not hold back. “He was an evil man,” said the pastor. “He cheated on his wife and abused his family.”

After going on like this for some time, he looked at the brother who had given him the check and said, “But compared to his brother, he was a saint.”

None of us can get away with hiding who we truly are – not from God, anyway. But when we come before God as our authentic selves, God looks upon all our limitations and failings and puts them in a new light. Yes, we are all sinners, but in the light of Christ, we are saints. There’s no need to hide your true self, not from God, and not from others, and certainly not from yourself, refusing to see and deal with who you truly are.

In fact, with Thomas, Jesus takes his doubt and turns it to a blessing, a blessing for Thomas and all who come to Jesus just as they are, trusting him to make everything all right.

After Thomas has his experience of the Risen Lord, Jesus says to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen” – those who live with fear and doubt – “and yet have come to believe.”

It’s not easy to come to grips with the doubts and fears we hide behind. But when we do – with God’s help – those doubts and fears are transformed into faith and peace, faith in the Lord’s love for us, and peace in our hearts about who we are deep down inside.

“Peace be with you,” says Jesus. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

Just as in Genesis God breathes the breath of life into the first human, so now Jesus breathes new life into all people. All of us are made authentically new in the presence of the Lord, loved and accepted in the Spirit of grace and mercy, all of us, standing side by side in grace and mercy of the Lord. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

We are invited, O God, to come into your presence as we are, not as we hope to be. We are invited to come, not only in our forgiveness of others, but in our acceptance of your forgiveness of us.

You do not look at how we're dressed, but rather at what's inside our hearts, as we offer others the cup of kindness in your name.

We are invited to come, not when we have uprooted the weeds of violence and wickedness, but as we rest in the assurance that your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. You cleanse our hearts of nagging doubts and suspicions, that we might come into your presence as we are, laying all such things at your feet.

This we do, here and now, confident that you know what to do with it all. We pray also in confidence of your ability and desire to heal and preserve wellness, as we lift up those we know in need of your spirit of strength, comfort and peace. And for us, O God, grant us the grace to listen with love, to think with compassion, to pause and consider, so that we might be a person others turn to because of our love of Christ and faithfulness to the Lord Jesus, who taught us to pray together, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.