

Podcast Transcript

April 16, 2023 Easter 2A

Acts 2:14a, 22-32 • Psalm 16 • 1 Peter 1:3-9 • **John 20:19-31**

<<Music: “Building Up a New World,” 1st verse, fade out under opening sentence.>>

<<“We are building up a new world, builders must be strong.”>>

[Intro and Transition:]

[Intro:]

Resurrection greetings beloveds and welcome to the Word is Resistance, a weekly podcast hosted by Showing Up for Racial Justice. In this podcast, we explore the readings from the Christian bible assigned for the week in the Revised Common Lectionary, focusing on how they are providing us tools to resist white supremacy’s culture of domination, exploitation, and oppression and how these texts can inspire new decolonial, antiracist, and liberatory visions and practices to build a new world.

I’m Dr. Sharon Fennema and I serve as the Curator of Join the Movement toward Racial Justice, an antiracism initiative of the United Church of Christ. I use she and her pronouns and am recording this podcast from my home which rests on the unceded and ancestral lands of the Ohlone people, who continue to lay down prayers and raise up life on this ground, in what is now known as Oakland California.

I’m honored to contribute to this podcast which is geared toward white Christians like me who are searching for ways to resource and expand our capacity for racial justice. As Christians of European descent, we know we have particular work to do in resisting the logics of supremacy, which we benefit from and are implicated in, to imagine and create a more just future for all of us and the whole earth.

This live recording of Dr. Vincent Harding’s song for the freedom movement is of a multi-racial “movement choir practice” in Denver, CO in December 2014, being led by Minister Daryl J. Walker. We are deeply grateful to the Freeney-Harding family for letting us use the song for this podcast.

[Transition:]

I’m so excited by the invitation from the crew of The Word is Resistance to this Easter theme around failure. I appreciate the invitation to delve deeply into moments and patterns of oversight, error, and harm. To me, it is an important part of the practice of accountability that serves to disrupt and dismantle the hold that white supremacy’s emphasis on perfectionism has on us. To courageously and humbly explore moments of failure for what they have to teach us is part of the work of radical, revolutionary love that keeps raising us from the death-dealing

aspects of our world. Traditional interpretations of the scriptures of Eastertide offers Christians some well-worn paths of triumphalism with Christus Victor as the conquering hero whose victory we have a stake and a share in. And we know where those roads have led the Christianity of empire too often. Instead, this Easter, I'm excited for us to find new paths through the resurrection appearances, ways marked by a willingness to dwell with failure as revelatory, to wonder what God has for us in wrestling with the moments when we miss the mark.

So as we prepare ourselves for this failure lab with doubting Thomas, let us join in a prayer from the Black Liturgies project by Cole Arthur Riley entitled, "For Those Haunted by Perfectionism."

"Tender God,

Thank you for being a God whose character is always enmeshed with profound forgiveness and mercy. We confess that we have not yet learned what it means to behold ourselves without the impulse to destroy ourselves. We are haunted by interior demands of perfectionism that came to us through a world that celebrates illusions of flawlessness. A world that sets standards of perfection that are only purposed to elevate whiteness, workaholism, materialism, and self-hatred. Help us to reject the mirages of perfection and release ourselves from expectations that only serve to destroy us. Let us become people capable of bearing witness to our flaws, safe from the shame that stalks us." May it be so. Amen.

[Main Content:]

The resurrection appearance we have the opportunity to dwell with today is one of the stories of Jesus showing up to his followers. Let us open our hearts to journey with our traumatized comrades into the impossible possibility of life emerging in the midst of death. From the gospel of John, chapter 20, verses 19-31.

¹⁹ When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors were locked where the disciples were, 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 my Parent 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. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” ²⁸ Thomas answered him, “My Sovereign 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 that are not written in this book. ³¹ But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Anointed One, the Child of God, and that through believing you may have life in Jesus’ name.

<< *Music interlude, verse 2 of “Building Up a New World.”* >>

<< *“Courage, sisters, brothers, people: don’t get weary, though the way be long.”* >>

As a person who has often identified more as a person of doubt or wrestling, than as a person of faith, I’ve always had a bit of a soft spot for Thomas. I’m grateful every time the gospels show us the disciples being so deeply human. It gives me hope that my very humanness can be a part of my journey of discipleship. Besides, who can blame Thomas for having a hard time believing his comrades story. It’s not every day that someone rises from the dead. What’s more, As Wil Gafney points out in her engagement with this scripture on her Womanists Wading in the Word blog, the whole point of the crucifixion was to display the power of empire. She says, “Jesus’ death was designed to be a spectacle, state-sponsored terrorism. But not just his. The whole point of crucifixion was to demonstrate what the Romans were capable and that it was useless, hopeless to defy them.” Can we fault Thomas for needing more than second-hand testimony to help him come to terms with the impossible? Today though, as I consider this scripture through a failure lab hermeneutic, I am mindful of another way that this Thomas-like desire for tangible proof, when combined with white supremacy, manifests in harmful ways for folks of European descent when we try to engage in practices of antiracism.

I am part of a team of folks who facilitate racial justice trainings for clergy in the Northern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ. The pedagogy of these trainings, created by Rev. DaVita McCallister, has the group engage with what she calls “fodder” to help us chew on different ways that racism shows up in our spaces so that we can move toward spaces of racial justice instead. One of the pieces that we engage to ground our discussion is a fiercely poetic reflection by Dominique Matti entitled, “Why I’m Absolutely an Angry Black Woman.” In it, Matti relays with growing intensity and building power, experiences of racism she’s survived, beginning at age 5. Inevitably when our majority white clergy members come together to discuss this article, someone says something along the lines of, “This is so horrifying. I just can’t believe it.” Now I know that typically the person who says this is giving expression to their overwhelm, to the feelings of distress and astonishment that arise in moments like these.

But there is also something true about the disbelief that they are voicing. For many of us of European descent, confronting the breadth and depth, the persistence and magnitude of others' experiences of racism is literally in-credible, more than we can imagine or accept as true. This, I believe, is one of the most persistent failures I both enact and encounter in my antiracism work with white folks: the failure to simply and truly, without any other proof, believe people when they share their experiences of racism and the impacts of white supremacy with us.

It should perhaps come as no surprise that this is a difficulty for us white folks, even those who long for racial justice and who actively strive to practice antiracism. Part of the way white supremacy persistently reestablishes and maintains itself is by insulating white people from the realities of racism. Our so-called privilege means that we don't have to confront the dailiness and the depth, the ugliness and the ubiquity of racist practices, and institutions; we only have to engage racism when we want to or feel ready to. We can only maintain the illusion that our privileges are earned and natural if we are kept from seeing all the ways in which racist inequities help us succeed as they adversely impact and harm people of color. All of these patterns of white supremacy encourage our incredulity and push us toward skepticism that bubbles up unintentionally in statements like "I just can't believe it."

A few years ago, I came across a powerful reflection on this same passage from the gospel of John that our own The Word is Resistance contributor M. Jade Kaiser wrote for *enfleshed*. It really changed and challenged the ways I had always read the story of Thomas. I encourage you to spend some time with M's full reflection "On Jesus, Thomas, Trauma and Wounds," but I want to highlight a few lines from it that help me go deeper into the failure to simply and truly, without any other proof, believe people when they share their experiences of racism and the impacts of white supremacy. M writes,

"You do not owe anyone access to your trauma because you hope for their solidarity... Strangers, knowingly and not, will feel entitled to see the marks on your hands, to reach for the wound in your side, because you asked them to care. But remember that you and your people and movements for Life have nothing to prove to be deserving of love, deserving of freedom, deserving of comrades and allies. So let your story be an invitation into collective liberation, not a plea for the crumbs of others' conviction."

I find myself sitting with Thomas this Eastertide and asking,
how often have I required the proof of wounds before I would offer my solidarity?
How often have I felt entitled to see the scars of racism in order feel secure in my allyship?
How often have I failed in my antiracism practice
because the insulation of my privilege has made me doubtful
and demanded that others feed my conviction with their stories of harm, suffering and pain?
How often have I chosen the comfort of the dominant narrative,

rather than the difficult truths of marginalized voices?

How often have I needed to “see it for myself” before I would believe

that those who were most impacted by racism know best how to survive, heal and resist it?

I find the ending of this story in John’s gospel very evocative. It always feels like one of those moments in a film or tv show when the character looks directly at the camera and talks to the audience. Here, the storyteller of the gospel narrative looks at us, and says to us directly, “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may continue to believe...” When I think about what I am learning from this failure lab interpretation of doubting Thomas and my own failures to simply and truly, without any other proof, believe people when they share their experiences of racism and the impacts of white supremacy with me, I’m mindful of all the things that have been “written so that I may continue to believe.” I think about all the books, articles, blogs and websites that break through the insulation of white supremacy and tell the truth about racism. I think about all the stories, insights and analyses that are offered in Instagram and Facebook posts, on TikTok and Twitter. I think about all the television shows and movies and films that offer glimpses into life experiences that are different from our own. I think about all the writers, thinkers, and teachers who are dedicated to telling us the stories of history that shatter dominant narratives. I know that for many of these authors and creators, I’m irrelevant – they’re not writing for me. And yet, what if the story of resurrection is that when I start paying attention to the signs that have been written down, I may continue to believe and that belief can transform me and make me a better co-conspirator in dismantling white supremacy and building up a new world? In the end, Thomas sees and believes. This Eastertide, as we continue Jesus’ work of rising up in the midst of the death-dealing forces of empire, can we imagine perceiving and believing in ways that don’t demand access to another’s wounds?

<<*Music interlude, verse 2 of “Building Up a New World.”*>>

<<*“Courage, sisters, brothers, people: don’t get weary, though the way be long.”*>>

[Call to Action and outro:]

[Call to Action:]

For our call to action today, I invite you to do a racially-informed audit of your personal influencers. Who’s voices, stories, ideas, and analysis shape your understanding? What life experiences and cultures are they grounded in? How are your personal influencers breaking through the insulation of white supremacy? You could do a similar audit for your organizations, churches, and other communities.

I also encourage you to think of a moment when you’ve inhabited this failure to simply and truly, without any other proof, believe people when they share their experiences of racism and the

impacts of white supremacy with you. What have you learned and how have you grown in ways that have changed your response? What would you do differently now? Share some of your own insights with others in a comment or conversation.

[Outro:]

Thanks as always for joining us. We'd love to hear from you all by commenting on our Soundcloud or Twitter or Facebook pages, or filling out the survey on our podcast page at surj dot org. Give us a "like" or rate us on iTunes, Spotify, or wherever you check out our podcast.

You can find out more about SURJ at surj dot org, where you can sign up for SURJ-Faith updates and find transcripts for every episode, which include references, resources, and action links. And finally, a huge thanks to our sound editor, Claire Hitchins!

[Words of blessing/encouragement:]

I leave you today with these words of Easter blessing.

If freedom begins when truths spoken with unrestrained honesty
release us from these persistent lies we carry in our skin
and we can't keep from singing,
then let today be abolition.

If healing begins when open-hearted attention
shatters the fragile armor of disregard
and we feel the ancestors breathe again,
then let today be balm.

If justice begins when small wounds and old agonies
no longer fester in timid silence and ignorant indifference
and we make our lives a revolution,
then let today be reparations.

If joy begins when courage shakes loose
these stories of violence and harm entombed in the land
and we learn to dance on their grave,
then let today be hallelujah.

If a new day begins when we will no longer abide
these crucifixions that unfold as hate and fear
and we rise up saying their names,
then let today be resurrection.

<<Verse 3 of "Building Up A New World, Verse 1 repeated.>>

<<"Rise, Shine, Give God glory, Children of the Light"

We are building up a new world, builders must be strong.>>

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RESOURCES:

- For more about the challenges and benefits of failure labs, check out “[How to Learn from Your Failures](#)” by Jeremy Adam Smith of the Greater Good Center at UC Berkeley.
- Delve more deeply into working with failure as part of generative accountability with Mia Mingus in “[The Four Parts of Accountability](#).”

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REFERENCES:

- Cole Arthur Riley, “[For those haunted by perfectionism](#)” *Black Liturgies* project, Instagram.
- Wil Gafney, “[Faithful Thomas](#),” *Womanists Wading in the Water* Blog, April 12, 2015.
- Dominique Matti, “[Why I’m Absolutely an Angry Black Woman](#).”
- M Jade Kaiser, “[On Jesus, Thomas, Trauma and Wounds](#),” *enfleshed Liturgy Library*.

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