

**Easter Wounds**

John 20:19-31

Rev. Jenny McDevitt

April 11, 2021

This second Sunday of Easter is always the story of Thomas. No matter where we are in the lectionary schedule, it's always Thomas. The lectionary — I know many of you are familiar with it, but for those of you who aren't — the lectionary is a three year, rotating schedule of scripture readings designed to ensure that we experience the full range of Biblical texts. It also sets in place a system that makes it possible for Christians throughout the world to be reading the same stories on the same day. When we finish the three year rotation, we start over again.

Now, it's precisely because the lectionary seeks to expose us to the diversity of the biblical witness that it chooses to tell the story of Easter differently every year. Sometimes it's the anticlimactic ending from Mark. Sometimes it's the glory-filled account from John. Sometime's it's the justice-oriented story from Luke, or the pastoral reflection from Matthew that we read ourselves last week. My point isn't about which story is assigned when, but rather that the story intentionally and purposefully changes. We tell the story of Easter differently each year. We tell the story of Jesus' life differently each year. We tell the story of Jesus' birth differently each year. We tell the story of Jesus' march toward death differently each year. We tell almost all of the stories differently each year. What stays the same, every single year without fail and without exception, is that on this Sunday, it's always Thomas. Thomas seems to be the only part of the Easter story that is wholly inescapable, at least as far as the lectionary is concerned.

His story begins on Easter night. The disciples are behind locked doors, held captive

by their own fear, when Jesus comes to them. "Peace be with you," he says, and shows them his hands and his side. And then he says it again. "Peace be with you." The disciples rejoice. But then we are told that Thomas wasn't there. We don't know where he was, just where he wasn't. He wasn't there, and when the others tell him what they have seen, he says, "I just can't believe it. Not unless I get to see what you saw. 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." For this, he is forever known as doubting Thomas.

We focus so much on Thomas' ultimatum, we tend to miss this: Jesus first shows the other disciples his hands and his side without anyone asking. He shows off his wounds when he encounters his beloved friends beside themselves with fear. That's what happens with Thomas, too. It's a week later, but the routine is the same. Jesus says, again, "Peace be with you." And he shows Thomas his hands and his side.

In the midst of fear and uncertainty, when questions loom large and everything seems to be going wrong; when the word on the street is that resurrection is afoot but it seems too good to be true, too risky to believe; when the pain is too much and the grief is too strong; when the world itself is entirely upside down; when the disciples when they would give anything to go back to the days when everything made sense, and everyone was okay; that is precisely when Jesus appears, and says, "Peace be with you. Peace, be with you. My peace I give to you. Because look! Look at

my hands and my side. Look! Look at these wounds of mine. Do you see them?"

When he needs to offer his greatest comfort and his most solid credentials, he says "Look! This is where the nails pierced my skin and this is where the spear entered my side." And I think the reason Jesus does this, and the reason the lectionary insists we tell the story about it every year, is that all of us are wounded, too. We all have our own places of brokenness. Now most of us, we're very good at hiding it, deep down behind busy schedules or picture perfect profiles or a devil-may-care affect. And make no mistake, self-discipline and sheer willpower can overcome a good number of things. But when death comes, it comes. There is no escaping it. And death comes in so many forms.

We all have parts of ourselves and pieces of life that we cannot fix. The unceasing prayer to become a parent that remains unanswered. Realizing we have become the type of parent we never wanted to become. Waking up alone in the house for the first time after a partner's death. Waking up alone in the house for the 400th time, and feeling a familiar old ache that refuses to go away. Students who are glad to return to school, because it means a return to school lunches. Students who lament a return to school because it means a return to bullying. Those who are discounted or dismissed because of who they are. Those who are discounted or dismissed because of who they will never be. To be human is to be wounded, at some point, in some way. Some of us more profoundly and some of us more peripherally, but still — there is brokenness in every life.

If I understand the text, that's why Jesus says, "Peace be with you," and then shows the disciples his wounds, once without prompting and once by request. The truth of the matter is, if God raised Jesus from the dead, God surely could have cleaned up those scabs and scars a bit better. Jesus could have come back radiant and perfect, every sign of the cross behind him

forever, without even the slightest shadow of death about him. Instead, he comes back having defeated death, but still marked by it.

It was over a decade ago now, but it was one of those moments you never forget. I was in my first year of ministry at First Presbyterian Church of Ann Arbor, Michigan, but I was in Norfolk, Virginia, with our youth group and other youth leaders for a summer mission trip. I was holding a ladder as a student painted the exterior of a house, dripping more than a little paint on me, when my phone rang. It was one of my colleagues back home, and she told me that our church's wedding coordinator had been on a road trip with her three daughters in Richmond, Virginia, just a couple of hours down the road. There had been a car accident, she said, and I needed to get there immediately. I raced to the hospital to find out that the mother and the youngest daughter had died. The two other girls were in the ICU. Their father was on his way to the airport. "Stay with my girls," he said. He arrived later that night, and as he looked at his daughters, attached IVs and machines, he asked me who might have his wife's wedding ring. And then he asked what he really wanted to know. He said, "How does anyone survive this? How does anyone live with this much heartbreak?"

I stayed with that family for five days in the hospital, until the girls were stable enough to be transferred by medical flight to a hospital back in Michigan. Their father and I sat together and talked together for hours upon hours, about everything from theology to reality television, but I never once ventured an answer to his most urgent question. Any possible response I could have offered would have been wildly inadequate.

My friend Meg, who is one of the very finest pastors I know, says, "When we face the epicenter of our pain, more than anything, we want someone to understand. We want someone to get it." She says, "It is too much to bear to be the only person who knows what our

specific, personal, broken-heartedness feels like.”

Jesus shows the disciples his wounds as his way of saying, “I get it. I’m with you. I have been there. I know what this feels like. I know how much this hurts.” He shows the disciples his wounds in order to declare, “There is no brokenness, there is no injury, there is no disappointment, there is nothing beyond my understanding.” William Temple, an English Anglican priest who was the Archbishop of Canterbury from 1942 to 1944, puts it this way: “The wounds of Christ are his credentials to the suffering race of humanity.”

But every time he shows his wounds, Jesus also says, “Peace be with you.” Three times he says, “Peace be with you.” You see, his wounds offer not just understanding. They also offer peace. A prayer and a promise of peace, a declaration that yes, we can be healed from brokenness. We can be raised up from death in all its forms.

Because his wounds teach us about our own. “Our wounds may not go away, but they will lose the power to hold us captive. In time, maybe not today, but in time, we will become defined not by **our** wounds, but by the love revealed in **his** wounds.”<sup>1</sup>

Easter is about that kind of love, and Thomas is the one who shows up every year, every single year, to make sure we never forget it.

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<sup>1</sup> These words come directly from my friend and colleague, Rev. Tom Are, senior pastor of Village Presbyterian Church. I am indebted to him for the direction of this sermon.