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"The Wounded Savior"
John 20: 19-31

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. 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.

Whenever I read this scripture, I think of this cartoon that has made the rounds on social media off and on over the past few years:



I always picture the original version of this cartoon being of the Disciples, huddled in their locked upper room in the weeks following the resurrection. You have to wonder what was going through their minds, don't you? They were afraid of the Jews, it says in the text. They probably wondered if this news the women brought from the empty tomb was for real. They were probably wondering if the Sanhedrin was coming for them next. They were probably wondering just what to do if the news from the tomb was really true, if they'd be seeing Jesus, just like Mary. Into the midst of that fear, doubt, and questioning Jesus did come. He wished them peace, he commissioned them to be his apostles. And things did change. Everything changed. The world changed. And we're living proof of just how much that is true.

But it's not the other disciples that we focus on in today's text is it? It's Thomas we zero in on. Good ol' "Doubting" Thomas, we say. He just wasn't faithful like the others were. He couldn't just take their word for it. He had to see for himself, that ol' "Doubting" Thomas. As if we're somehow morally superior to him for our faith. As if we can condescend to him and pat him on the back for his misguided desire to see and to touch for himself.

But I just can't do that today. I can't feel any moral superiority to Thomas. I can't admonish him for his desire to see and to touch for himself. I can't see myself as any better than him, or more knowledgeable than him. In fact, the more I learn about Thomas from reading the Gospel of John, the more I admire him. Did you know that in John 11, when Jesus makes the move towards Judea to heal Lazarus, a move that will ultimately result in conflict with the Sanhedrin and Jesus' own death, theologian Paul Duke tells us that, "Thomas grimly declares,

'Let us go, that we may die with him.' (11:16) When Jesus, on the verge of his crucifixion, tells the disciples that they know where he is going, Thomas is straightforward enough to say that, in fact, they do not (14:5). He is by no means a person of unsteady conviction or of a predisposition to doubt, but someone who is willing to face and to name the evident difficult facts."¹ Not only that, he's only asking to see and touch the same things that the others have already had the opportunity to see themselves.

And isn't it fascinating that Thomas' focus is on the wounds of Jesus. Not just his presence, or that he was in their midst the week before, but upon the actual wounds of Christ, the nail marks, the spears wound. This brings us to a point that is so often overlooked in the Thomas text. Why the focus on the wounds of Jesus? Why was Thomas so compelled to see and to touch? Because the wounds matter. Because scars matter.

It's hard to go through life without accumulating an assortment of scars. Sooner or later we're wounded and it leaves a mark. You're probably thinking of a few scars you bear even now. Good news for guys, I was reading an article that a modest facial scar can actually make you more attractive. So in some circumstances they're not all bad, but most of us are more ambivalent about our scars. But our scars tell a story. They have a history that tells about who we are and what we've been through. Like the war hero wounded in battle. Or the survivor of a terrible accident. They speak. And we also know that not all scars are visible, they can be psychological, spiritual, or emotional.

Indeed, our scars matter. Jesus' scars matter. Well, we suppose that Jesus could have been resurrected into a perfected body don't we? One free of any marks or scars, or wounds, or scars. But instead he bears the scars of his wounds, they still mar his appearance. This is hugely important.

First of all, because it illustrates that our bodies matter. That Jesus' body mattered. And that Jesus was there in their midst that day in a physical body. If Thomas could see and touch Jesus, he was *really there*. He was not a vision, a metaphor, or a ghost. He was Jesus, the real deal. The bible teaches that we aren't disembodied spirits inhabiting a shell of flesh for our brief time on earth.

¹ Simpson Duke, Paul. "Homiletical Perspective on John 20: 24-31." Feasting on the Gospels: John, Volume 2. Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville. 2015. Pp. 329-331.

But, rather, we are souls connected to flesh. We are spirits embodied: touchable, woundable, lovable, huggable, and tangible. Paul puzzles over this in 1 Corinthians 15, but when he describes the spiritual flesh we assume in the afterlife. He grants that they will be spiritual bodies unlike the ones we have now, but bodies nonetheless. As theologian Kristin Johnston Lergen puts it, "human beings are bodies, we are flesh; we have been created enfleshed, and we will live forever enfleshed... God created our bodies and called them good, and good they remain, even in the resurrection."² Thomas needed to see that our bodies matter, that we matter.

Second, and this is the most significant point, Thomas needed to see that Jesus was wounded. He needed to really see and touch the wounds of Jesus to determine for himself that it hadn't all been a farce. He needed to determine if the humanity of Jesus had *cost* something. Whether the wounds were for real or not, or it was all just a show.

In the early church there was a heresy called Docetism. The basic idea of this heresy was that Jesus wasn't really a human being like you and me. He was a cosmic being playing at being human. He just swooped in and assumed human form for his and our amusement. He wasn't really enfleshed. He wasn't really vulnerable like us.

And this is a terribly problematic idea. Because if that were true, then the crucifixion would have cost Jesus nothing. Then it was all just pretend. Then Jesus' death wasn't real. Then Jesus' suffering was just drama. And if this were all true, then God wasn't really with us like he promised after all. Then Immanuel, God with us, is not quite what we think it means, nor is it quite what we need it to mean

But the wounds *were* there. Christ wasn't undamaged by them. The disciples *could see and touch them*. Thomas *could see and touch them*. And this, despite the fears of the people in the cartoon, does indeed change everything.

² Johnston Lergen, Kristin. "Homiletical Perspective on John 20: 24-31." Feasting on the Gospels: John, Volume 2. Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville. 2015. Pp. 328.

Because God suffered too. Because Jesus was wounded like we are wounded. Because Jesus died, just like we die. Because it wasn't all pretend. Because Jesus suffered all the horrible agonies we do.

Look, we have this huge misunderstanding as Christians. We are prone to suffer this false illusion that being a Christian means that we'll somehow live a life magically free from suffering. That we'll somehow live these phony prosperity gospel-esque "blessed" lives free from illness, hardship, poverty, or pain. Hogwash. This is not the gospel. The truth of the Gospel is that, as Christians, not that we'll be free of suffering, but that our suffering will be transformed. Why? Because God is with us in our suffering. Because, God in Christ suffered just like us. Because the beatings and mockery he endured was real. Because the nails, the ropes, the beams, the spearpoint, and the tomb were real. Because he stood before Thomas and the others wounded and scarred. Because the brutality and suffering of this world is all too real and all too horrible. But the fact that our savior suffered those things right along with us, and by the power of God was resurrected out of them and through them... this changes everything.

Thomas understood that. He stood before his friends, and his demand to see the wounds and touch the side is a living witness that the wounds of Christ matter. It matters that Jesus suffered like we do. It matters that Jesus bears the scars of his wounds, just like we do. It matters, because if Jesus lives, despite these wounds. There is hope. There is hope that God can work in and through suffering to something better on the other side. It matters because then all this struggling and striving and fighting we do to make it though life has a deeper purpose and meaning. Because the resurrection redeems these things. It means that we are not alone in our distress. It means that death, disease, illness, loneliness, or despair don't have the final word. It means that love wins in the end. It means life wins in the end. It means that we are redeemed in the end.

When Thomas wanted to know this truth. Indeed, demanded to know this truth. He said, '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.' (John 20: 25) Jesus didn't scorn his request, or mock him, or disown him. Instead, "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.'" (20:27). Many of us are standing before

God in the midst of our distress in a posture like Thomas' and you're asking those same questions, and demanding to know the proof of that same amazing love. And in each and every circumstance, and in the midst of each and every hardship Jesus' answer is the same. We ask:

"Jesus, were you there when I lost my mother?": "See my hands, child. Touch my side," says Jesus.

"Jesus, were you there when they diagnosed the cancer?": "See my hands, child. Touch my side," says Jesus.

"Jesus, were you there when she left me and it all fell apart?: "See my hands, child. Touch my side," says Jesus.

"Jesus, were you there when I lost it all, and I felt like my life was over?": "See my hands, child. Touch my side," says Jesus.

When Thomas encounters God, something beautiful happens. He is transformed. His is the most faithful declaration of faith in the whole of the New Testament, "My Lord and my God!" he declares. He met the risen Christ that day. We meet the risen Christ too, in the midst of our searching, in the midst of our distress, he is there. He is with us and he loves us. "See my hand child. Touch my side," he says, our Lord and our God. May we have the faith of Thomas.

Alleluia and Amen.