

April 19, 2020

John 20: 19-31

Prayer: Dear Lord, now that the first Sunday of Easter is past, let us rest in the security of the resurrection. Let us live as Easter people. In Jesus' holy name we pray, Amen.

In praise of doubt, in celebration of scars

I had been in this pulpit for seven years before I had a pastoral awakening.

It was on a Passion Sunday. The praise team from First Presbyterian Church of Greer was visiting, and they sang "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?"

As they sang that hymn full of sorrow, I had time to look out over the congregation. And I was suddenly struck by the sorrows that individuals in this congregation were carrying.

Struck by which family had just lost a beloved member.

Which had a child in addiction.

Which individuals had lost jobs.

Which mothers were struggling to shelter their children.

Who was battling disease.

Who was battling depression.

Who was battling fear.

Who was battling voices.

Who was battling loneliness.

Who was praying every single week for the same friend in a nursing home.

And I was struck by what a privilege it is to be entrusted, in some small way, with the care of a congregation.

To be allowed, in some small way, to run my finger over your scars.

Last week, I preached about the resurrection from the gospel of Mark because its abrupt, fear-cloaked ending reminds me so much of our situation today. But we could have read from John's

gospel, about Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene in the burial garden.

We will go to John's gospel today. In our reading, it is still Easter, though now it's evening. Fear still reigns, and Jesus is about to make a second appearance.

Please turn in your Bibles to **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.' ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

²¹Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'

²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If 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. ²⁵So 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.'

²⁷Then 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.'

²⁸Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' ²⁹Jesus 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. ³¹But 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.

There is a lot going on in this passage, but I'd like to talk about just three of them – Jesus' scars, Thomas' doubts, and what happened when the two came together.

Ernest Hemingway once wrote, "The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places."

The world breaks everyone. Afterward many are strong at the broken places.

That was certainly Jesus' experience. Broken, nailed, hung and pierced by the Roman Empire, his scars on this night were evidence of his human experience.

And those scars are evidence of why he understands so intimately our sorrows today.

When we pastors sit with families who have lost a young member, we don't have magic words. We don't even have adequate words. We cannot promise a savior who takes away pain.

What we can promise is a savior who bore pain. A savior who understands betrayal and abandonment and sorrow. A savior who has the scars to prove it.

Presumably after hearing from Mary Magdalene about the risen Jesus on Easter morning, the disciples hid behind locked doors on Easter evening. They feared that the people who killed Jesus would come for them next.

Instead, Jesus himself came to them. And he showed them his scars to prove he had died and was resurrected.

Or was that the reason? Did he show them those nail-scarred hands and that raggedly split torso for another reason? Could he

have been inviting them to share *their* brokenness? Could he have been offering some sort of solace in the communal sharing of *their* wounds, *our* scars?

Maybe in showing “**them his hands and his side,**” he was letting them know there was no need for pretense. Maybe he was letting them know that the resurrection was precisely intended for those of us scarred by the first-century world, for those of us broken by Hemingway’s 20th century world, for those of us now suffering through a pandemic-riddled 21st century world.

Two of the disciples were missing that evening – Judas who betrayed Jesus, and Thomas, mysteriously called the Twin. If Thomas was known to his disciple buddies as “the twin,” he has been known as something else ever since.

That’s because of his famous words: “**Unless I ... put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.**”

He has been known ever since, of course, as Doubting Thomas.

I don't know about your church background, but I grew up thinking that was a bad thing. Back in Sunday school at Overbrook Baptist Church, we didn't want to be like Doubting Thomas. Of course, we didn't want to be like Mary Magdalene either, but we sure didn't want to be like Doubting Thomas.

The French reformer John Calvin wrote that “the stupidity of Thomas was astonishing and monstrous (H)e was not only obstinate, but also proud and contemptuous in his treatment of Christ.”

I totally disagree with Calvin. I have changed my mind completely about this disciple.

The first part of my change came when I connected him to his previous mentions in John's gospel. Back in chapter 11, John told of Jesus's plan to go to Bethany to raise Lazarus from the dead.

The disciples panicked, because Bethany was in Judea, and the Jews in Judea had already tried to stone Jesus. The disciples begged him not to go back there.

But Jesus told them flatly he was going to see Lazarus. And this is what Thomas said to his fellow disciples: **“Let us also go, that we may die with him.”**

Let us also go, that we may die with him.

This was no frightened, sniveling, doubting apostle. This was the epitome of the disciple Jesus wanted: **“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.... Those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”**

On the way to see Lazarus, and possibly face stoning, Thomas was ready to die. He was ready to take up his cross and follow Jesus.

The other time we met Thomas, he was asking a question during one of Jesus' discourses. Jesus was talking to the disciples about what would happen after his death.

He said, **“In my Father’s house are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.”** (John 14: 2-4)

Thomas interrupted and asked, **“Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”** (v. 5)

Jesus didn't rebuke him. He simply responded, **“I am the way, and the truth, and the life.”** (v. 6)

Thomas was not afraid to ask questions, and he was not afraid to die for Jesus. Daring Thomas, I think of him now. Devoted Thomas. Audacious Thomas.

A week after Easter night, the disciples were once again in the room where they'd met the resurrected Jesus. Remember: They'd been shown his hands and his side *before* they had an opportunity to doubt. This time Thomas was with them when Jesus appeared.

Jesus didn't seem angry. Rather, he calmly invited Thomas to touch his scars in the way his friend needed to. **“Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”**

I don't see rebuke from Jesus in this passage. To the contrary. I see Jesus coming back *expressly* to give this beloved disciple the assurance he needed.

I see him coming back purposely to assure his devoted disciple: *You were right all along. You were right when you offered to die with me at Bethany. You were right when you admitted you didn't understand my allusions to a hereafter. And I'm here to prove it to you by showing you my scars.*

And Thomas responded, “My Lord and my God!”

There is nothing wrong with doubt. That’s why God gave us minds and personalities. Nothing makes my blood run colder than to think someone is afraid to ask questions, afraid to express doubt, afraid to voice an opinion.

We force an atmosphere of conformity when we are loud and adamant. We make room for doubt when we are quiet and humble. We open our tent flaps. We invite others in, the questioners, the tentative, invite them to see how we live together.

Doubt embraced beats doubt denied every time.

As the conversation between the one scarred and the one newly believing wound down, Jesus said to Thomas: **“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”**

I believe that John, writing nearly 70 years after these events took place, was setting up readers – like us – who would not have

the privilege of seeing those scars. Our belief would be based on these writings, not on first-hand witness.

The gospel writer was candid about his goal: These words **“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.”**

John was no disinterested historian. He was an evangelist, a believer, and he wrote to convince us to become the same.

If we are to believe, it will have to be without seeing. But it won't have to be without thinking, without questioning, without doubting.

Forty years ago, in April of 1980, I moved to Anderson County to be the bureau reporter for *The Greenville News*. Before I was even scheduled to start work, a tornado hit on a Sunday night. I got a call from the Greenville newsroom to go out and cover it.

I saw the damage, did the interviews and phoned the story in. But on my way back home, my car hydroplaned and ran off the road. Passersby called EMS, and an ambulance took me to the hospital. My face was banged up pretty badly, but I was released that same night. Vince called and told my parents.

Early the next morning they showed up on our doorstep. It wasn't that they doubted what Vince told them. They just wanted to see for themselves.

Sometimes wanting to verify isn't doubt at all.

Sometimes it's simply love.

Amen.