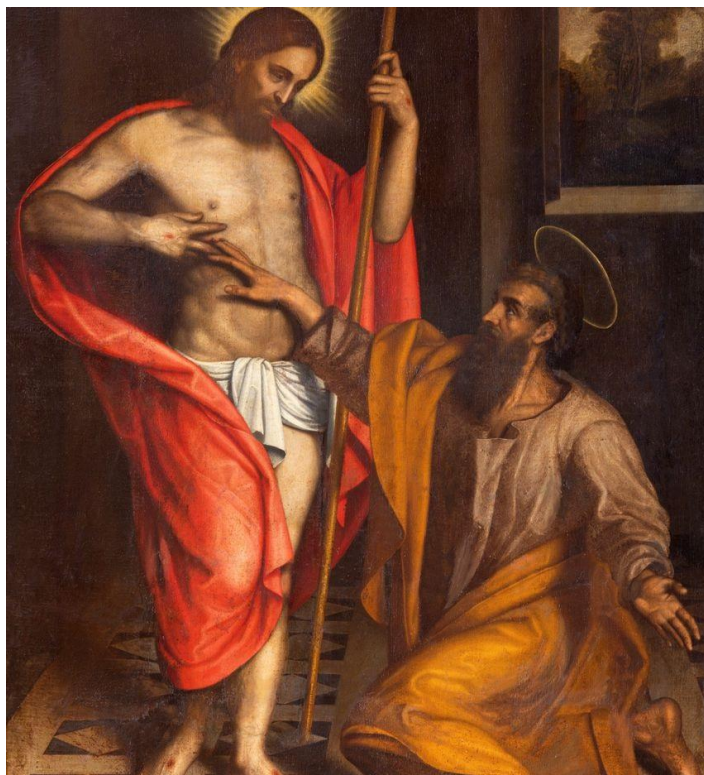


Our Scars



John 20:26 "But (Thomas) said to (the disciples), 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and (unless I) put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'"

This is the second of a series of seven sermons that I will be preaching all this Easter season on the "Witnesses to the Resurrection," a rare chance to review all of these biblical stories in a single season. Last week, we looked at the familiar story of the women at the tomb. Today is the equally familiar story of the Doubting Thomas, which is read on the Second Sunday of Easter in each of the three year lectionary cycle.

But the part of this Gospel that surprises me, though, is not Thomas' doubting ways. That is simple human nature. That is why this is such a beloved Resurrection appearance, because we can all so easily identify with Thomas' wanting more proof. Yet actually, labeling him as the "Doubting" Thomas as we have done isn't a very fair description at all. For Thomas was not alone in his doubt and disbelief. In fact, if one looks carefully at all the other recorded accounts of the Resurrection in the Bible, Thomas was in fact no more a doubter than the others were. Indeed in every other story of the Resurrection appearances that we have, the initial response of the disciples was to doubt and disbelieve.

For example, in the familiar story of the women going to the Tomb on Easter Sunday morning, when the women later reported what they had found to the others, the women's words, according to Luke's Gospel, "seemed (to the Apostles) to be an idle tale, and they did not believe them" (Lk. 24.9, 11).

When Mary Magdalene also went back to the other disciples as "they mourned and wept," and told them that she too had seen the Lord, according to Mark's Gospel (Mk. 16.9-11), "when (the disciples) heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it."

Then later that very day, two of the disciples were on the road to Emmaus (Lk. 24.13-35), which is next week's Gospel

story. And at dinner that night as a stranger broke bread with them, their eyes were opened and they recognized him as Jesus. The two disciples were so excited by this that they immediately rushed all the way back to Jerusalem and found the eleven gathered together "and those who were with them," and told them all what had happened, "how Jesus was made known to them in the breaking of the bread," but again according to Mark's Gospel (Mk. 16.12-3), the others "did not believe them."

By the time that the two disciples had returned from Emmaus, Jesus had also appeared to Simon Peter, because they were told this when they arrived back in Jerusalem (Lk. 24.33-4). No description of this actual resurrection appearance to Peter is recorded, although the fact of it is mentioned by both Luke and Paul. And yet still the company of the disciples did not believe.

And then as they were talking, the doors being shut where the disciples were for fear of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them as in this week's Gospel story. Only Thomas was missing. Yet according to Luke's version of this story (Lk. 24.36-43), the disciples were startled and frightened, and supposed that they saw only a spirit or a ghost, that it wasn't really Jesus. So Jesus said to them, "Why are you troubled and why do questionings arise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet that it is I myself; handle me, and see; for a

spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have." And in Mark's Gospel, Jesus then upbraided the disciples for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen.

So it shouldn't be surprising that when Thomas returned and the disciples told him that they had seen the Lord, that he didn't believe them; that he demanded proof that it wasn't just a ghost they saw; that he wanted to see the print of the nails in his hands and put his hand in his side to be sure. For the other disciples hadn't come to believe so easily themselves. None of them had believed the testimony of the women at the sepulcher, or the disciples on the road to Emmaus, or Mary Magdalene, or even Peter, when they each had reported having seen Jesus. And even when they themselves did see Him there that very night, they thought at first that it was only a ghost, and they questioned in their hearts and disbelieved, we are told. Thomas was no different from the other disciples. He was no more a doubter than they were. For belief had not come easily to any of them.

But the part of this story that does surprises me is Jesus' scars. In fact, of all the Resurrection appearances in the New Testament, this is the only one that explicitly mentions them. "When it was evening on that day, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he

showed them his hands and his side." Almost immediately therefore upon his appearance, the Resurrected Jesus displayed to his disciples his wounds.

But when Thomas returned and heard about what had happened, he didn't believe his friends. He wanted to see the wounds for himself; he wanted to put his own fingers in the print of the nails and his own hand in the wound in Jesus' side. So a week later, when Jesus appeared again, he invited Thomas to touch his scars. Jesus showed Thomas his hands and his side; he showed him the marks of his crucifixion; he showed him the place where the cold hard nails tore through his warm, soft flesh, and the spot where the Roman soldier's lance pierced his tender side and sliced through his heart. "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side;" Jesus said to the doubting Thomas, "do not be faithless, but believing." And so the wounds of the crucifixion were clearly part of the Resurrected Jesus, part of who he was but also who he is. For even risen, Jesus still bore the scars of his brokenness.

And we all know about scars; for we all have them. They tell the story of our lives, just as surely as Jesus' scars told his. Each of us bears the wounds from our individual struggles, visible and invisible. Sometimes it is our health that 'breaks' down, or we suffer financial loss and go 'broke,'

or our relationships 'break up.' At some point in each of our lives, we will all be 'broken' in some way too, like Jesus. And therefore we will bear the scars of those times on our resurrected bodies just as assuredly as Jesus bore his. Our resurrected bodies will bear witness to the life we have lived, to the sorrows we have borne, the tears we have shed, and the wounds we have suffered. We would not be whole without them. We would not be who we are without them.

In the same way, Jesus' scars are the distinctive figure of who he is for us. In fact, the Risen Jesus is recognized by his wounds; that is how the disciples knew that it was really Him and not just some angelic messenger or holy vision. The disciples identified Jesus by his scars. That was how the doubting Thomas was convinced too, seeing in Jesus' hands the print of the nails and placing his fingers in the mark of the nails, to know that it was really Him, the crucified One.

And so it is with us. We too are known by our scars in life, by the traumas of our stories, by the tears we have shed. The difference is --- the all too important difference is --- that we usually try to hide our scars, to cover them up somehow, and not reveal them as easily as Jesus did. We tend to deny and minimize our afflictions. We prefer to hide the pain, to cover up our hurt, and pretend that we have no scars --- though we all have them. For we tend to think suffering and pain makes us look

weak, not strong. *We think we are stronger if we can deny our pain.* We usually view such injuries as a sign of frailty, of being cursed not blessed. And we fear being despised by others for our failings, for our sins, for not being strong enough. We want to appear valiant and capable and in control, not weak and flawed and broken as we all are. We don't want to stand naked before each other, so unlike Jesus, we habitually hide the wounds of our life and conceal or deny them as best we can.

But if we do not reveal our wounds to one and another, if we hide them, if we shy away from showing them, then we cannot be fully known or recognized by one and another as who we really are, and thus we cannot be fully loved as we are, or redeemed. But if we are open and honest about ourselves, and about our lives, about our sorrows and our scars, only then we can truly know God's redemptive love; for only as we are broken can we truly begin to understand the mercy of God, how God loves us as we are unconditionally, broken and all. And only as we are wounded can we truly begin to understand and accept our real selves, our own sins and our shortcomings, and indeed our very need for salvation.

And after we have openly acknowledged our brokenness, our sins, our failings, we usually begin to view other people differently; for we have by then learned something about compassion and acceptance; we have learned to love others as

ourselves, as we have been loved by God despite our flaws. Our wounds make us stronger, and make us more able to help and heal one another. Alcoholics Anonymous knows this truth well; knows that recovering alcoholics are the best support for those struggling to stop drinking, just as those adults who have lost a child can be most comforting to others who lose a child, or someone who has survived a divorce or the death of a spouse can help heal those going through the same thing as we have gone through.

Our wounds then, when we do not hide them, when we are not ashamed, are the signs of God's love and power in our life; they are the very places where we trust in God for healing and for forgiveness. And when we are willing to show our wounds to one and another, only then do we truly proclaim to others our faith in God's redemptive presence and power in our lives; and only then can God work through us, allowing good to come from our pain, allowing healing, allowing new life to be had, for us and for others. Our scars then, like Jesus', are where we find God and God's redemptive power most clearly at work in our lives. Our wounds then are where we begin to discover a new life and the true power of the Resurrection. AMEN.