

John 20:19-31

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell

Sunday, April 7, 2024

Holy Doubt, Holy Scars

I met a guy last summer in Ireland with hair down to his waist, who was the road manager for the Rock Band AC/DC, and a PhD. in theology. I asked him if he was still a Christian. He responded, "You know I've never been a very good believer." I responded, "That describes all of us whether we admit it or not."



Thomas missed the meeting. Jesus had barged in on the Disciples' pity party a week previously and he had been hearing, frankly, nonsense, for a week. His poor deluded friends, missing Jesus so badly, were insisting he was alive of all things. Risen from the dead. "Excuse me if I don't believe a person came back to life for crying out loud," you can hear him saying throughout the week as he continues to hear Jesus is alive.

He's simply being honest. And thank God for an honest portrayal of what belief actually looks like in the beloved community of Jesus. It's a New Belief that includes doubt. And as some of you have experienced, "Church is too often the most risky place to be spiritually honest." That is NOT the kind of church we aspire to be. We welcome questions.

So here we are a week later, and Christ appears saying, of course, "Peace be with you" because he appears seemingly out of nowhere! I can almost hear a disciple after the 2nd or 3rd time of this saying "a little warning please and you wouldn't have to say, "peace be with you!"

Jesus showing up for Thomas tells you something: He doesn't begrudge your doubts, your questions, any of it. He didn't judge Thomas for his doubt but offered him peace.

Jesus makes sure and pursues people after his resurrection, and I'm grateful one of those he pursues is someone human enough to doubt. Jesus never invites you into certitude. To quote Old Testament scholar Pete Enns from his book *The Sin of Certainty*: "The opposite of faith isn't doubt, it's a rigorous certainty." Jesus never made it about "believing perfectly," or doing anything else perfectly. Jesus takes you as you are with doubts and questions and all the messiness of what it means to be human.

And Jesus meets Thomas where Thomas is ... and does this with everyone.

Daniel Brereton, an Episcopal priest in Canada wrote:

"Mary Magdalene needed to hear her name spoken in order to believe. Peter needed to hear 'Peace be with you' and be forgiven to believe. Thomas needed to touch the

wounded places to believe. Paul needed to be knocked off his high horse to believe. God meets us where we are.”

Thomas’ vulnerability is an encouragement to bring our whole selves to Jesus.

When we create space for people to be safe with all that they bring to the table, it makes room mysteriously for the fresh wind of the Spirit, and She will breathe the grace of Jesus into a person’s life, into a community, and empower them to be good news for their community so resurrection can happen all around them.

This new belief also involves scars.

Jesus walks towards Thomas, with all his scars, and leads by showing his own. Saying in effect “I know your wounds. Here’s mine. I know what it’s like to be betrayed. Abandoned. Cursed. Crucified. Thomas, come here, touch my side and hands.”

We wear our scars. Some we are proud of. I could show you scars from surgeries after a football or baseball injury. I could show you the 3 broken fingers and how crooked they look. I could tell you about 4 surgeries on my feet. Makes me feel tough and athletic to show you those. I like telling the stories behind those scars.

Not all scars have fun stories behind them. Like the ones on my own face. I remember getting my first bit of acne in 6th grade. By 8th grade my face was completely covered. More than acne, this was under the skin, inflamed, cysts. I had to have them lanced on occasion. I wore a baseball mask and a football mask over half the year for sports. In Florida. It was a nightmare. Painful, physically, and emotionally. Each day I would inspect my face in the mirror before school. All the treatments were making zero difference. My once clear complexion, with a dimple in both sides of my cheeks, was gone. Forever. It was puberty and adolescent hell.

It was only about 7 or 8 years ago when a drunk patron of a bar I was in taunted me about my facial scars. A guy shouted “Hey, were you a boxer in a previous life?” I didn’t get it at first. Then it dawned on me. So, in “Christian love” I walked over and knocked him off his stool.

KIDDING.

I just stood up and left.

I hadn’t felt that way since probably junior or senior high school. And my whole body felt it. And I was surprised how deep it hit me.

Scars — either you hearing me talk about mine, or you contemplating yours — run deep. They run straight to shame. I’ve listened to 34 years of stories of people who carry so much shame in their bodies, and the impact that has had on them throughout their lives. I know this is universal. How much this shame steals, has stolen, the joy of living for us!

But think about this: Shame for what? Scars simply proclaim, you have lived a real, actual life! A life that produces scars and stretch marks and emotional triggers and nightmares and joys and redemption and ecstasy and beauty! It seems our world tells us that we aren't allowed to look like we have lived each day consecutively since our birth! But we in fact have!

The power of scars is that they tell stories. Every act of love, every insult, every moment of pleasure, every interaction with humans, every hateful thing we have said or had said to us, happens to our bodies. And, we know now, that our body remembers.

Years ago, I had shared with my therapist that my dad had reached into the back seat and slapped my face. He responded, "that side of your face just became flush." The body remembers.

Every kindness, sorrow, every ounce of laughter. We carry it with us in some form or another. We are walking embodiments of our unique story, and the scars from that aren't optional, but the shame from that is.

Jesus' resurrection body with his attendant scars was how he was recognizable to Thomas and others! Not because his resurrected body fixed everything and made him a perfectly smooth-skinned Savior! With 6 pack abs! Jesus shows up with his scars which means Jesus had NO SHAME about his body. He didn't try to hide the mark or conceal them in any way.

Jesus was pro body, all bodies, without exception.

He knew that he would be known by his scars and so are we. We can only really be known and know others when we show our scars. When someone shares their scars or even failures with me, I feel less alone in the world. How about you?

As one of my favorite theologians, and winner of 29 Grammys, Beyonce, says: "show me your scars and I won't walk away".

She wrote those words most likely in the throes of a therapeutic process with her husband who had been unfaithful. Healing would only be possible in a mutual sharing of their scars with each other so it can be healed, and trust can be restored.

These bodies of ours are a holy mix of dirt and the very breath of God. We also believe that human bodies are so spiritually rich that even God wanted to have one! A body that would, like you, like me, add on many scars.

Hear Jesus today speaking peace to you and calling you into an authentic belief with doubts and questions and scars ... and editing Queen Bey (and only Jesus gets to edit Queen Bey): "Show me your scars, I'm here to share mine with you and I will never walk away." Amen.