

**SERMON: “He Showed Them His Wounds”**

**April 19, 2009**

PRAYER: Almighty and eternal God, you are the strength of those who believe, and the hope of those who doubt. Speak to us now through the reading and preaching of your word, that we, who have not seen, may come to believe, and in believing, receive the fullness of Christ’s Spirit, offering forgiveness of our sins and peace amid the struggles of faith and life today; through Christ, our redeemer, by whose wounds we are healed. Amen.

OT LESSON: Isaiah 49:13-16

NT LESSON: John 20:19-31

According to the liturgical calendar of the church today is the Second Sunday of Easter—more commonly known as **“Low Sunday.”** It’s not hard to see why. Attendance in most churches is about half of what it was last week. The “Hallelujah Chorus” is back on the shelf in the choir room for another year. The Easter lilies have begun to wilt, and now it’s back to business as usual in the life and worship of the church. “Low Sunday.” Fleming Rutledge says that “Every year one hopes that *this* will be the year that so many people will be convinced by the truth of Jesus’ Resurrection that they can hardly wait to return the following Sunday; but it never seems to happen.”<sup>1</sup>

But you are here, and that’s what counts. It is worth remembering that after Easter what Jesus tells Peter in the final chapter of the Gospel of John is **“Feed my sheep,”** not **“Count my flock.”** Our task this morning on this Second Sunday of Easter is not to beat-up on those who aren’t here to defend themselves, but to explore more deeply the meaning of Easter for ourselves as we consider how ones like us come to faith in the risen Christ.

Each year on the Second Sunday of Easter the common lectionary of scripture readings points our attention to the disciple we call **“Doubting Thomas.”** Thomas is the patron saint of “Low Sunday.” The last time we met Thomas in the Gospel of John was back in chapter 14 when Jesus gave his disciples that precious promise we hear so often, especially at funerals.

**“Let not your hearts be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.”**

That’s when Thomas blurted out, **“Lord, we don’t have a clue as to where you are going; how can we possibly know the way?”** And Jesus answered, **“I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me.”**

Jesus went on to reassure Thomas, and all the disciples, that, even after his death, he would not abandon them. He would come to them in Spirit to be with them forever. **“In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me. Because I live, you will live also.”** Then he promised them his Spirit, and gave them his benediction. **“Peace I leave with you; my peace I**

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<sup>1</sup> Fleming Rutledge, *The Undoing of Death* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002) p. 300.

**give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.**" A wonderful, precious promise!

But that was then--back before all hell broke loose—in the most literal sense of the word. Jesus had told his disciples that he was going to God, but they could never have imagined in their worst nightmares that it would be in such a horrible, brutal way. And as for the peace he had promised them...they hadn't had a moment of peace ever since that night in the upper room when he sought to prepare them for what lay ahead. I wonder if they even remembered his last words...or did they get drowned out in the torrent of so many other harsh and angry cries, **"Crucify him! Crucify him! We have no king but Caesar!"**

That was then. Now on the evening of the first day of the week, Easter evening, the disciples were huddled behind locked doors, fearing that the same ones who had handed Jesus over to the Romans, would hand them over as well. At least for the time being, with the door bolted securely in place, they thought they were safe. In a deeper sense than they knew, they were safe. Suddenly, John says, **"Jesus came and stood among them."** Was it a realization of their greatest hopes, or a confirmation of their deepest fears? If he were alive again, what would he say to those who had betrayed and abandoned him? What would he do to those who had denied him and fled for their lives and left him hanging on that cursed cross? Would he scold and shame them? Would he condemn them for all eternity? NO--he said to them the same words he had said before, **"Peace be with you."** "Peace be with you."

It was just as he had promised the last time they were together, when he had washed their feet and commanded them to love one another and promised that the Father would send them the Holy Spirit in his name. **"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you, not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."** And now he was back to offer that peace in person.

But how? How would he do so? Would he speak gracious words of comfort that would banish their fears? Yes, but first, John says, **"He showed them his hands and his side."** He showed them his wounds. Think about that a moment. Does that strike you as odd? A Hollywood account of the resurrection would have the wounds in his hands and side magically heal up before their eyes. The red, jagged edges of the wounds where the iron spikes had torn through his wrists and the gaping wound of the spear in his side would close up and become like new. Through the special effects of Hollywood the resurrection would do away with the ugly wounds of the crucifixion.

But that is not at all what scripture says. All the gospels insist that it was by his wounds that the risen Christ was recognized as the crucified Jesus. "He showed them his hands and side," says John, "then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord." In his resurrection, Jesus' body was transformed and glorified, and yet the wounds of his suffering were still there.

In a deeply theological sense, they still are. In his wounds our own wounded humanity is taken into the very life of the triune God. Our wounds do not separate us from God. They bind us

most closely to him. He has written us on the palm of his hands. The risen Christ is still and always the one who bears our griefs and carries our sorrows into the very life of God. He shares our suffering to the very depths. That is where Emmanuel, God with us, is to be found. Not merely in the bright places where life glows with peace and joy--but in the dark and terrifying corners where life falls apart, and wounds fester, and death keeps getting the upper hand. It is by his wounds that we know that the risen Christ is with us all the way--to the very depths of life and death, as he takes our wounds in his own body into the very heart of God.

In his poem "Caliban in the Coal Mines," Louis Untermeyer has his character say, "God, you don't know what it is (like)—You in your well-lighted skies." But he does know. We have an Advocate in heaven who knows what it is like to live in the darkness of these days, and in these bodies of ours that break and bleed and die. It is the risen One who takes our wounded humanity into the heart of God who offers, **"Peace be with you.... Receive the Holy Spirit."**

But Thomas was not with the other disciples on that first Easter evening. We are not told why. All we know is that when they told him that Jesus was alive again and had stood in their midst and breathed on them the Holy Spirit, he wouldn't believe it. Thomas did not respond to the good news of Easter by exclaiming, "That's awesome! I can't wait to see him for myself." His response was more like, "What kind of Kool Aid have you guys been drinking? You don't expect me to believe stuff like that, do you? Look **"unless I see in his hand the print of the nails and place my finger in the mark of the nails and place my hand in his side, I will not believe."**

Who can blame him? Thomas was just being realistic. He was not about to be taken in by some idle tale, a foolish grief-induced fantasy. He knew good and well that dead men don't rise. Thomas was the consummate realist, and he had a degree in mechanical engineering from Clemson to prove it. He would not, he could not, believe anything he couldn't get his hands or his head around.

But did you notice that in the text Thomas has another name by which he is called, a nickname? He is called **"The Twin."** Whose twin we are not told, unless it could be any one of us. Like more than a few of us Thomas was not willing to base his belief merely on hear-say from others. He had to see and know and experience for himself. **"Unless I see the nail prints in his hands and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe."**

Look how Jesus responds to Thomas. He doesn't berate him. He doesn't lecture him. He doesn't try to argue him into faith. Jesus meets Thomas where he is, and offers him what he most needs to believe. At the beginning of the Gospel of John, Jesus had invited his first disciples to "come and see." Now at the end he issues the same invitation again to Thomas. Come and see for yourself. **"Put your finger here, and see my hands; put out your hand and place it in my side; do not be faithless but believing."**

We are not told in the text whether Thomas actually touched the wounds in the hands and side of Jesus. What we are told is in the midst of his doubts, Jesus offer Thomas, the Twin, our twin, that which he needs in order to believe.

What does it take for a person to come to Easter faith? In his Gospel John seems to suggest that all that the one he calls the “Beloved Disciple” needed to believe that Jesus was alive again was the barest of evidence--an empty tomb and re-arranged grave clothes. And all Mary needed was to hear her Master calling her name with infinite tenderness, “Mary.” And all the disciples huddled in fear behind locked doors needed to was to see his wounds and receive his Spirit of peace.

But for whatever reason Thomas needed more. Thomas needed to know for certain that the wounds were real. He had to be convinced that Jesus did not just pretend to die on the cross, then get up and go on his merry way. Thomas was not about to risk his life for something the disciples had made up about Jesus’ resurrection. He had to know that it was real—as real as the wounds of his nail-scared hands and spear-cut side. Thomas, the Twin, our twin, had to be convinced that the resurrection of Jesus was not just a reassuring myth made by the disciples to keep alive their dying hopes and dreams. It was real enough to be touched.

To his credit, Thomas insisted on knowing and believing for himself. He did not need a lecture from the other disciples on having faith. He did not need a set of arguments for the resurrection. He needed to experience it for himself. Easter faith is always a profoundly personal thing. You cannot make someone else believe the same way you do, as much as we might wish you could. You cannot push your children, or your spouse, or your best friends into faith. They have to come to believe for themselves, for reasons that grasp them personally.

I am intrigued by the fact that the one to whom Jesus says, “**I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me,**” is the very one who will not be pushed into believing in a way prescribed by others. I think that is John’s way of insisting that there is more than one way to come to faith in the one who is “the way, the truth and the life.” There is no single path that we all must follow. There is more than one way to come to faith in the risen Christ. The essential thing is not how we get to him, but how he gets to us. He refuses to let any of our locks and chains, any of our doubt and disbelief, block the movement of his love toward us. Time and time again he breaks through our fears to show us his wounds and to offer us his Spirit of peace.

Fred Craddock has suggested that for some of us “faith is born as quietly as a child sleeping on grandmother’s lap. For others faith is a lifetime of wrestling with the angel.” Some of us, he says, cannot remember a time when we did not believe, having been surrounded by a sense of Christ’s love almost from our birth--while others of us can name the exact day and hour we first came to believe, “our lives having been shattered and reshaped by the decision of faith.”<sup>2</sup>

At the end of his Gospel John sets before us four different stories of how people come to Easter faith, and no one way is made the only way. The God who created us as unique individuals, respects our individuality, and works within each of us in deeply personal ways. Your way of coming to Easter faith and mine may be quite different. But behind all the different ways, it is the

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<sup>2</sup> Fred Craddock, *John: Knox Preaching Guides* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982) p. 142.

same living Lord who is at work within each of us to offer the gift and call forth the miracle of Easter faith.

Thomas does not travel the same road to faith as did John or Peter or Mary. Jesus meets him where he is and offers him his own wounded, wondrous love. Jesus says in effect, “Dear Brother Thomas, if for you seeing is believing...then see, touch, experience. Believe for yourself.” And at the gracious invitation of his Master, Thomas who has doubted the most, confesses the most. **“My Lord and my God!”** It is the fullest confession of faith of any of the disciples. Thomas, the hardest to convince, has come to the firmest faith of all.

If you find yourself reflected in the face of Thomas, the Twin—if you want to believe the Easter gospel, but are too honest to pretend to believe what you have not yet experienced—this story is for you. The good news that rings from this story is that the risen Christ does not just come to us when our faith is strong and all our questions have been answered. The promise of the gospel is just the opposite--that the living Lord comes to us where we are and as we are and offers each of us what we need to accept the love that will not leave us locked behind doors of doubt.

How he may choose to come into your life, I cannot say and you cannot know in advance, except to say that we can set no limits on when or where or how the risen Christ may walk through the locked doors of our lives. All we can say for certain is that he does and that he will continue to do so, as he breathes into us the breath of his Spirit, filling us a peace that passes all understanding. When that happens, we, too, can exclaim with our twin brother Thomas, **“My Lord and my God!”** to whom be all glory and majesty, all dominion and power, now and for ever more. Amen

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