

John 20: 19-31

Jesus Appears to His Disciples

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Jesus Appears to Thomas

Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Have you ever played the **Scar Game**? The Scar Game is an ice breaker I've used before to get people talking about their lives. It goes like this: I show you one of my scars and I say, "I got this scar." Then everyone oohs and aahs, and then I tell you how I got it. Then it's someone else's turn. It can get pretty gruesome. The last time I played was at camp, someone had had knee surgery from stress due to playing competitive sports, someone had a scar from falling out of a tree when they were ten, someone fell while doing skateboarding tricks. Now these scars say something about people—they're daredevils, or they're athletic. I hitched up my pantleg to show my fellow counselors the five inch long scar on my thigh where I'd basically impaled myself on a tent-trailer door latch when I was in middle school, hadn't gotten stitches, but had treated it myself with Neosporin and butterfly bandages and went back to running around with my brother. What did this say about me? I wasn't a daredevil or athletic, but maybe a little clumsy, stupid and stubborn. I thought I had won the game... but then Sean spoke up.

Sean was an EMT and is now a fireman, and sticks in my head most clearly because of his very Irish name (we started calling him Darby O'Gill after the Disney movie) and the stories he told about going clubbing when he was in college in the 80s and learning the routine with his buddies so they could perform "Everybody Dance Now." Hilarious. Sean was a funny guy, didn't take

himself too seriously most of the time, and the kids just loved him. “Well, all I’ve got is this…” and he started to lean forward to show us a tiny freckle on his finger, then in the same moment leaned back and pulled his shirt up. Running along his side, he had this HUGE scar. Sean… this crazy funny RunningMan pro… had given one of his kidneys to his mother. **We never would have known about that part of his life if we hadn’t played the Scar Game.**

It’s true in literature and film as well. **Harry Potter** has got a few scars, but the lightning bolt on his forehead is so prominent and famous that it’s actually how people identify him! Harry Potter, the Boy who Lived. **Frodo Baggins**, the loveable hobbit from Lord of the Rings, has a scar that never quite goes away from where he was stabbed on Weathertop by the WitchKing, and another from She-lob the icky spider: testaments to his incredible journey across Middle Earth to destroy the source of an oppressor’s power. **Will Turner** in Pirates of the Caribbean – SPOILER ALERT—has his own heart cut out and the closing images of the movie show just the edge of the scar under his shirt… a permanent reminder of his love and his destiny. I’m sure you can think of more examples.

Now I don’t think our scars define us, but **they tell stories**. Our scars are **witnesses to the lives we’ve lived**… the things that we’ve done (like falling out of a tree), and the things that others have done to us (like stabbing us with a Morgul blade… or, you know, vicious rhetoric). They’re permanent little reminders of the painful things we’ve been through.

And wouldn’t you know it, scars are even in the Bible. When the disciples gathered in the Upper Room, they had heard from Mary that Jesus was alive again… but they didn’t believe it. Someone took the body. They thought the Pharisees were up to something, and wondering if it was a trap. What was going to happen to them? They were afraid, and they were grieving, and they were hiding.

All of the sudden Jesus is standing there, with them. He shows them his hands, his side. He says, “I’ve got these scars.” It says the disciples were overjoyed! This wasn’t a magic trick, or a ghost, or an impersonator… This was the same Jesus they’d traveled with, and learned from, and that they’d seen brutalized. This was THEIR Jesus.

And he says “Peace.” And he breathes the Holy Spirit on them… the Advocate he’d promised to guide them. And he sends them out. He says, “See? Even these scars can’t keep God down. Love is going to defeat all the odds. And if you love people the way I love you, you’ll reveal God to the world. And when you do that, you give people an opportunity to enter into relationship with this God of limitless love. It is in choosing or rejecting this relationship with God that sins are forgiven or retained. Go be witnesses to God’s love. Go show people what grace is all about.”

Wow! Well, that’s pretty mind-blowing. The disciples are pretty psyched about that. Jesus goes, and they’re all still talking about this wonderful revelation of Jesus when Thomas comes back. Thomas had been out running errands. Thomas was the practical disciples, he was in charge of logistics. When Jesus said, “I go before you to prepare a place,” Thomas responds, “Now, can we get there off of the 101 or should we take 280 instead?” So when everyone else was afraid the Pharisees were still on the hunt, especially after they thought they’d taken the

body of Jesus, Thomas was brave enough to go out and do the shopping, pick up a paper so they could read the obituary column and see what they'd written about Jesus, and maybe check the sports scores and skim through the funnies. So Thomas comes back to this group of people who he'd left frightened and cowering, completely frozen in grief – and they're giddy. They're overjoyed. They're laughing and smiling and carrying on.

Thomas thinks they've lost their minds. They start babbling about how Jesus came and breathed on them (“*Breathed* on you?” Thomas is thinking), and how the doors were locked and he was there. Thomas reacts *the same way* the rest of the disciples reacted to Mary—he doesn't know what to do with that information. He's not any more doubtful than anyone else. Just like them, he thinks there must be some other explanation. And he makes this remark: “*Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.*”

Fast forward a week.

The situation is the same... they're all gathered this time, Thomas is there too. But I want to see if you see the other thing that is different. Here are the passages again:

The first time: *On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"*

The second time: *A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"*

Did you notice what was missing the second time? There was no fear. Jesus had brought peace, Jesus had sent them out to witness in love, and with love and peace there is no room for fear.

Now, about this time, if I'm Thomas, I'm thinking, “Well, who would have believed it?” And Jesus responds directly to what Thomas had said before. *Then Jesus said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."* Jesus offers what Thomas needs to believe. He offers his whole self, scars and all. And it prompts Thomas to say, “My Lord and my God.” This is the first confession of Jesus as God. This story is not about Thomas, but about Jesus. **This is a story about how Jesus gives us his whole self in love, and calls us to do the same for others.**

Jesus is not being snarky with Thomas when he says “blessed are those who have not seen.” Jesus is saying that *everyone* has the same access to God through Jesus as witnessed to by Gospel stories. **The gospel witnesses to the life of Jesus the way scars witness to our own pain.** We experience healing of the wounds in our lives physically; we experience God's resurrection power through these words that tell us about God's love in Jesus.

And just like Jesus's scars gave faith to Thomas and the disciples, our scars can witness to God's resurrection power in our own lives. I'm not just talking about physical scars anymore,

but psychological, emotional, spiritual, social, political... all of the parts of us that are hardest to share. All of the ways we can identify grace in our lives can be witnesses for other people to reach out to experience God's love in their own lives. As Bishop Yvette Flunder once told me, **“Sometimes the thing about you that blesses other people may be the thing you're trying to forget.”**

Our scars witness to lives touched by brokenness, people who understand suffering, people who are not removed from the pain of a hurting world. We are part of this world, just as Jesus was. We call the church the body of Christ, and yet the body of Christ retains wounds. I mean... look at the church! We have taken some hits. We've taken so many hits that it's hard to believe we could recover from them: the Inquisition, the Crusades, witch hunts, and more. We've taken so many hits the world thinks we're dead... defeated by logic and science and our own sordid and hypocritical history of violence and death-dealing. And yet, I've seen—and I know you've seen—the many ways that the church continues to be a vehicle of grace, doing the work that Jesus sent us out to do: feeding the hungry, standing against oppression and injustice, visiting the vulnerable and forgotten parts of our society.

Now, logically, no **body** could recover from that. Thomas and all the other disciples saw the damage that was done on Good Friday. There's just no coming back from that.

And yet Jesus came back from it. Jesus defeated death. I say that a lot, and I don't know if I'm always good about explaining what I mean. Jesus didn't defeat death like Harry Potter defeated death, some fluke or trick or accident or bit of forgotten knowledge. Jesus came to earth, God-in-flesh, knowing that the systems of injustice he was going to be confronting, and the love he was going to be telling us about, were going to get him into trouble. And when Jesus was hauled before the authorities of the Roman Empire and given the chance to recant his good news, and deny that he'd ever talked about a kingdom more powerful than the Rome based around love and justice and peace... he didn't back down. Pilate, Herod, the Church Council—they all gave him the opportunity to avoid the pain. But Jesus came to be the Truth... Jesus took the consequences.

But unlike the prophets who they'd killed, unlike the leaders of former failed revolutions, killing Jesus didn't work. Silencing Jesus was a failed mission.

Jesus rose again. Jesus was the sacrifice that wouldn't stay sacrificed. Jesus was the victim that didn't disappear afterwards and let people forget about what had happened. Jesus broke the cycle by being visible, and by remaining visible, opening our eyes to all of the other victims. Jesus came back and breathed Peace. **He broke the cycle of violence, not by being crucified and ending the confrontation, but by not staying crucified and continuing the message of good news through his disciples.**

There's no way he's alive again, said Thomas. Nobody could recover from that. Our whole world came crashing down on his head. He couldn't come back from that. And now it's time for us to move on.

But Jesus did. And the scars prove it. Jesus's scars prove that resurrection happens. **Jesus's scars prove that the history doesn't go away, but the future is characterized by hope anyway.**

And Jesus sends us out to do the same. **Our wounds are not the end of us; there is no injury or malady or condition or pain bigger than God's ability to heal us. That doesn't mean wounds don't hurt. It means they don't get the last word. We are called to witness to God's love, and sometimes that means sharing our scars.** We are called to stand against violence and oppression, no matter the odds, like Jesus did. That's one of the ways we show love, and reveal God. Our scars show not who God made us, but how God has raised us up. Our scars point to the healing of joy, the gift of peace, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our own lives.

I think God can use our scars to reach out to other people, to help us be witnesses to other people in their times of unbelief and hopelessness.

I have a friend named Lindsey who became a Christian two weeks before her 16th birthday. On her 16th birthday, she got a phone call from her doctor. "We've gotta talk." Lindsey was diagnosed with Epilepsy. It meant she was never going to be able to drive, her likelihood of having kids was greatly decreased, she would be dealing with chronic pain and uncertainty. That's a huge blow for anyone, much less a 16 year old, but Lindsey had been going to church, and decided to give that 'prayer' thing a try. She said, "God, this is so big. I don't know what to do with this. What would you have me do?" Well, Lindsey went on to college and then to seminary and now she's a chaplain, which means she goes with people through their own medical challenges in solidarity, as a witness to hope and a voice of compassion.

Brenda Vaca is a natural citizen of the United States, but her parents are from Mexico. Brenda grew up in L.A., and saw the wounds of racism and discrimination first hand, especially against people of Hispanic heritage. Brenda became a pastor and is now a witness that God's love doesn't have borders for those who are most vulnerable in our society: immigrants and migrant workers. She stands in solidarity with them as they struggle for justice. By her presence, she shows that God cares, and that the church is paying attention, too.

Israel Alvaran is a UMC pastor who was ordained in the Philippines. He did a lot of community organizing and social justice work there, and came to Berkeley, California to get his doctorate so he could teach at the seminary back home. When the extrajudicial killings started happening a couple of years ago, Israel knew it wasn't safe to go home. He heard about his friends and colleagues being shot and killed, one by one. He knew going home was a death sentence, so he applied for political sanctuary. He is now working with other people who are struggling through the government bureaucracy for their own basic human rights, like the right to earn a living wage, to seek opportunities for work, to have decent working conditions, and to have basic, fair labor practices.

For all three of these people, these were big wounds in their lives: chronic illness, racism, political oppression. But all three gave these wounds to God, and let their scars witness to God's

grace in their own lives. They reach out to those who need it, those on the margins, and their scars are a way for them to do that.

There is a lot of work to be done in the world. And there are a lot of stories to share.

What wounds do you need to give up to God? What stories do you need to hear?

What has God been preparing you for?

What scars do you have, what history have you experienced, that will magnify your compassion for someone else? What hope do you have to offer?

What gifts has God given you to offer as part of the body of Christ?

The body of Christ is wounded and scarred. And today, we're going to have communion. This is when we remember the brokenness. This is when we recognize the wounds. This is when we experience the healing and are nourished to go and share that healing power with the world.

Amen.