

“It’s not Jesus if he doesn’t have scars”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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John 20:19-29

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

There are some wounds that do not heal.

When I was little, my mom had this cloth ice pack with a picture of a smiling bear on the front. I called it “Boo Boo Bear.” Whenever I skinned my knee or got a bee sting, my mom would place Boo Boo Bear on the hurt, and I would feel better. I suspect it had less to do with the ice and more to do with being close to my mom.

Fast forward some years and I am a freshman in college. I have a friend who asks me to listen to John Mayer’s song “Daughters”. She says it’s about her. In case you don’t remember, the chorus goes like this: “Fathers, be good to your daughters / Daughters will love like you do... Oh you see that skin? / It’s the same she’s been standing in / Since that day she saw him walking away / Now she’s left, cleaning up the mess he made.”

My friend told me she had a hole inside of her, a hole where a father used to be, a father who, when she was just a very young child, took off and never returned, a father who, before that, had a penchant for leaving dark blue bruises on her mother’s body. It was a hole where childhood should have been. After he left, my friend lost two parents; her mom was there, trying, but she was so trapped in her own issues that she couldn’t see the hurting child in front of her, a child who had to grow up fast and take care of her two brothers and her mom.

It was a hole where love should have been—an echo chamber for a haunting question: “Why was I so easy to abandon?”

I wanted so badly to believe that this hole could be filled, could be made better. But, no offense to Boo Boo Bear, there are some wounds that do not heal.

In our text this morning, the disciples, like us, stand in Eastertide. Jesus has been resurrected. This is God incarnate. I mean, he walks through a door like a scare-you-out-of-your-mind ghost. This is what we have all been waiting for: the redemption of the world, the in-breaking of light. And yet this, our God, still bears the scars of a state-ordered execution. The holes where they pounded the nails into his flesh are still there. At this, the most important moment of the Gospel, when death has literally been defeated, when love has triumphed over violence and hate, when sin has been overcome, even at this moment, even for God, there are some wounds that have not healed.

This new world starts out much like the old one.

When my friend told me all this, I wanted to fix it. It took me years to understand that my friend didn't need fixing. That hole was not a foreign cancerous tumor to be excised. It was a part of her now. I watched as she drew from that hole a love for others, a deep and abiding concern for those whom the world has tried to break, a determination to be better than her parents. She's now a lawyer. She does family law; she does divorce cases and custody disputes; she works with children who have their own holes. She has been happily married for almost eleven years; they have two children of their own. Like any marriage, theirs has its bumps, but theirs is one of those marriages that gives you hope for the tenacity of love. My friend has become one of the most beautiful people I know. And it wasn't because her wounds healed, or because she "got over it" (trust me, the wounds still hurt), or because it was a good thing in disguise (that last being a very dangerous theology, by the way). It was because my friend, that day, wasn't just showing me a wound, a hole; she was showing me a well, a place from which to drink every time she needed to remember how deeply love is needed in this world, or to remember why she fights or who she wants to become.

What's the first thing Jesus does after he walks into the room where the disciples are gathered in fear? He says, "Peace be with you," and shows them the holes in his hands and in his side. He doesn't try to hide these scars as if something to be ashamed of, as if a tarnish on his divinity and perfection. On the contrary, he offers his wounds as a blessing. And the disciples, instead of being disappointed, rejoice.

Jesus says to them, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." So I send you out, as fragile as I, into a scarred and wounded world to show your wounds and say, Peace. [repeat this line]

But one disciple is missing. Thomas, that poor disciple to whose name is forever affixed the word "doubting," doesn't get to see Jesus. Maybe it was his turn to go get bread; or maybe he wasn't afraid like the others. Whatever the reason, can you imagine coming back and the others saying to you, "Oh Jesus was here, you know, the guy who got crucified, our Lord and Savior, he was here and you just missed him"?

We need more Christians like Thomas. That's not exactly what the text says. The text seems to be intended to reassure in faith those who were not first generation believers, those who, like Thomas, never saw Jesus, never walked with him, never touched the hem of his garment, and yet are being asked to believe: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." But Thomas's request to see Jesus is not so unreasonable. Everyone else has gotten to see him. Thomas is only requesting what Jesus had already done voluntarily for the other disciples and earlier for Mary Magdalene.

And I believe that our text, if God is indeed present in it, is capable of saying more than what was intended. The Gospel of John is intent on presenting an even more divine Jesus than in any of the other Gospels. So, when Luke tells this same story, there's no locked door, and Jesus eats, as if to emphasize his corporeality. John changes all of that. And yet the wounds stay in. There is something essential about them that even John can't get rid of.

And Thomas doesn't just want to see Jesus' wounds; he wants to feel them, to run his fingers along the jagged edges left by the blunt nails of the cross. The text says this is a sign of

“unbelief.” But maybe Thomas has recognized the importance of seeing Jesus’ wounds. Maybe Thomas is saying, I can’t really know it’s Jesus, I can’t really know him, until I have touched those most vulnerable and wounded parts of him. I don’t just want the good stuff, the Jesus that walks through doors; I want the real Jesus, because it’s not Jesus if he doesn’t have scars.

So, I say again, we need more Christians like Thomas. It’s almost as if John is trying to tell an ego story of Jesus but Thomas insists on the soul story. These are terms the Quaker writer Parker Palmer likes to use. Ego stories are those public narratives that we tell almost like PR (just the good stuff); soul stories, on the other hand, are our true stories, with room even for failures and struggle.

I ask you: What if church was a place not for our best attire and best show of faith, but an honest revelation of vulnerability, of all the wounds that need God’s grace, all the wounds that compel and empower us to heal the world?

I think Thomas gets it: Jesus’ wounds, just like my friend’s, don’t need Boo Boo Bear; they don’t need to be covered up in an ego story; they don’t need to be fixed. Those wounds are a part of Jesus now, a part of what he was willing to do for us. And it is in seeing them that, for the first time in the Gospel, Jesus is called “My Lord and My God.” Jesus is called many things, but Thomas is the one who, in the last words spoken by a disciple in the original form of the Gospel (as we know it), addresses the wounded Jesus just as Israel addressed YHWH.

I think Thomas gets it: our holes can be a vacancy, an emptiness, or they can be a capacity.

The church doesn’t need another ego story. We fear that if we talk about our wounds, people won’t want us anymore. But Thomas is telling us that the gritty reality of woundedness is precisely what people want and need. It’s honest. It’s real. What the world needs now in its church and in its leaders is not heroes but listeners, not perfection but permission to be flawed. In a society where everything is a commercial or a campaign or comes with stadium seating, we need disciples like Thomas who are willing to run their fingers along the edges of wounds. Because it’s not Jesus if he doesn’t have scars. And it’s not the church, either. **Amen.**