

**Sermon for 4-28-19**  
**Scriptures: John 20:19-31 and Acts 5:27-32**  
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*Note:* *On the day after yet another hate crime against our Jewish siblings in faith, and so soon after the horrific bombings in Sri Lanka and mass shooting in New Zealand, I must say this:*

*Our Christian Scriptures, particularly John's Gospel, have often been taken out of context and weaponized to justify anti-Semitism over the years. In today's reading, when John says that the disciples were hiding "for fear of the Jews," we must recognize that this is not a statement of judgment or condemnation. The disciples (all Jewish men) were not deathly afraid of all their brothers and sisters in faith. They were afraid of Caiaphas, the high priest who persecuted Jesus, and his other extremist cronies; the ones who were so threatened by Christ's teachings that they were willing to align themselves with the godless powers of the Empire to destroy him. Those imposters, who called themselves men of God even as they murdered Jesus (and later on, many of his followers) were no different from the religiously-motivated hate criminals of today, who twist holy teachings to justify violence and death. No one who is willing to kill "for their faith" has any true knowledge of God. All they know is love of evil and lust for power. Such violence -- whether directed at Christians, Muslims, Jews, or any others, has no place in God's kingdom.*

It's really not fair to call him "Doubting Thomas" -- let's get that out of the way right now.

Thomas, who was called Didymus (the Twin), one of the original 12 disciples, was not there in the locked house where his friends were hiding out when Jesus appeared to them. It's still the day of the Resurrection, in the early evening; perhaps 12 hours since Mary Magdalene came running to share the amazing news with them: "I have seen the Lord!"<sup>iii</sup> None of the disciples believed Mary's words until Jesus himself appeared to them and showed them his wounds... and we don't call them the "Doubting Disciples," do we?

We get it. It's hard to believe something that should be impossible. It's difficult to embrace (or even accept) the possibility that every rule about how the world works and has always worked and always will work has been broken, forever. But that's what the Resurrection has done. And it's what we celebrated last Sunday -- pain and suffering do not last forever, death is not the end of our story, and evil does not get the last laugh. Christ is risen, indeed, and the world will never be the same. Alleluia!

Back to our friend Thomas... what was he doing while the others were hiding away behind locked doors? Could it be that Thomas was the only disciple brave enough to go out into the city after hearing Mary's words ("I have seen the Lord!")? Was his an everyday errand, purchasing bread or fruit for his companions; or did he go to see the empty tomb with his own eyes; or maybe track down Joanna and the other women who were with Mary Magdalene that morning to hear their side of the story? We cannot know why Thomas went out, but we do know that he did go out, which indicates a degree of courage unique among his fellow disciples. And remember, this is the same Thomas who earlier, just before Jesus raised Lazarus back to life, said "Let us also go, that we may die with him."<sup>iii</sup> Thomas is, and has always been, willing to put his life on the line for Christ. So from now on, let's call him "Brave Thomas."

When he returns to the house that night, after Jesus has appeared and then left, Brave Thomas isn't being unreasonable. The other disciples tell him, "We have seen the Lord!"<sup>iii</sup> Sound familiar? It's the same thing Mary Magdalene said to all of them that morning. They didn't believe her then, and Thomas doesn't believe them now.

"Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."<sup>iv</sup> Brave Thomas asks for the same interaction, the same kind of proof that his friends experienced; and he gets it, a week later. Jesus returns, knowing exactly what Thomas needs in order to believe and know and understand that **Resurrection is real**. And when Thomas sees those wounds, and touches the jagged scars on Christ's holy body, Resurrection becomes reality for him, and he declares his faith in his Savior: "My Lord and my God!"<sup>v</sup>

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Now that that's settled, I want to make a wild suggestion here. **What if** this Gospel story is not so much about Thomas and what he needs, but about **us** and what we need? What if Christ's

physical appearances (first to the 10 disciples in the house and then to Thomas specifically) are really about **us** -- our faith, our belief, our scars, our Savior?

Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and the other women, along with the 11 remaining disciples, needed to see and touch the living, breathing, wounded Jesus in order to be *witnesses of and evangelists for **Resurrection***. Resurrection is a great idea, an amazing theory, an inspiring and hopeful possibility... but if Resurrection is not **real**, then it remains just that -- a nice idea, a lovely bedtime story that we all grow out of someday, but we keep telling it to our children because we want them to have happiness and innocence and hopeful spirits, at least for a while, at least until they wake up to the hopeless reality that suffering and death and evil are in charge and there's nothing to be done about it.

But that's a lie. The most powerful lie, the most dangerous lie, the most insidious and soul-sucking lie out there, and a lie that so many people in today's world believe (and we fall into believing it too, from time to time). The **truth** is that **Resurrection is real**. The truth is that love and mercy and peace and justice will have the final word. The truth is that the forces of evil and death are stripped and laid bare in the shining light of holiness and righteousness and grace.

And how do we know it's true? We, who were not there with the women to discover the empty tomb, who were not there with the disciples to see the Risen Christ -- how are we supposed to move from disbelief to faith in Resurrection?

Our faith has its foundations in the powerful, encouraging, life-giving testimony of those who came before us, Mary Magdalene, who first proclaimed the Resurrection; the disciples, who saw the wounded and risen Jesus; the second generation of believers, people like Paul and Silas and Tabitha and Stephen and Priscilla, who went willingly to their deaths while spreading the Good News of Christ; the evangelists (the four in our Bible and others), who painstakingly collected and recorded their accounts of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus for our

benefit; and so many more. As Peter says at the end of today's reading from Acts, "[They were] witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to [us]..."<sup>vi</sup>

We've got the testimony of all the witnesses through the ages, both near and far; but we've also got the Holy Spirit and its myriad gifts. When Jesus breathed onto his disciples and told them to "Receive the Holy Spirit," he wasn't just offering them a special consolation gift.<sup>vii</sup> He was proclaiming the beginning of a new era in God's story, a new Creation. The Holy Spirit is, literally, the breath of God. It's the same word in Hebrew -- *ruakh* -- when God breathes life into the very first human at the beginning of Genesis, and when the prophet Ezekiel prophesies to those dried-up bones to receive the breath of God and live again<sup>viii</sup>. And now here, when the Risen Christ prepares his disciples for the age to come, he breathes the very Spirit of God into them, so that they too may be reborn, awakened, inspired, and empowered for the work that lies ahead in God's new Creation.

That very breath of God, that eternal Holy Spirit, is still flowing and dancing between and among us today. Can you feel it? When you feel a stirring deep in your soul, when your heart is strangely warmed, when your fears and doubts begin to fall away, when you glimpse some tiny fraction of the eternal Reign of God in the here and now -- that's it. That's the Holy Spirit, that's the breath of God upon your face. That's hope and holiness springing to life, again and again. That's Resurrection.

I did some reading about wounds and scars this week, about what it means and how it feels to bear the marks of injury and violence on one's body. I wanted to understand why seeing those wounds meant so much to our friend Thomas, and why it matters that we worship a scarred Savior. I was captivated by the words of writer-activist Aabye-Gayle Francis-Favilla, who published a detailed catalogue of every scar on her body, big and small, and finished with this: "... [S]cars are not the enemy... Hating my scars would be a second injury. They are proof of life. I accept them because they are the toll I'll gladly pay for living."<sup>ix</sup>

Scars are proof of life, and the toll for living. For Thomas, and for Jesus, *and for us*, Christ's scars are proof of new life. Christ's scars are the toll he gladly paid for our living in a new Creation, where Resurrection is truth and the Holy Spirit is life. He became a fragile, vulnerable, wounded Lord so that a fragile, vulnerable, wounded world might have new life, and have it in abundance. He breathed his Holy Spirit into our ancestors that we might have abundant faith. Christ is not ashamed of his wounded body; for it is the symbol of redemption, and the beginning of a new era for all who find their hope in him. Thanks be to God! Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> John 20:18 NRSV

<sup>ii</sup> John 11:16

<sup>iii</sup> John 20:25

<sup>iv</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>v</sup> John 20:28

<sup>vi</sup> Acts 5:32

<sup>vii</sup> John 20:22

<sup>viii</sup> Genesis 2:7, Ezekiel 37:9

<sup>ix</sup> <https://thebodyisnotanapology.com/magazine/perfection-is-hazardous-and-scars-are-inevitable-so-i-might-as-well-learn-to-love-them/>