

Messiah Moravian Church  
April 16, 2023  
Second Sunday of Easter, Year A  
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John 20:19-31

## EVERY SCAR TELLS A STORY

For insights into today's passage, I want to acknowledge the writing of Professor Jonathan L. Walton, Minister of The Memorial Church of Harvard University.

Your scars, where do you wear them? Is one on your finger when the screwdriver slipped as you worked feverishly to assemble a Christmas bike? Is there one in your palm when the serrated knife cut through the bagel or vegetable much faster than you expected? Is your knee scarred from that bike accident years ago? Did a surgeon cut you open to heal you? Is an invisible scar on your heart from a horrible relationship, an unspeakable tragedy, a crushing disappointment?

Every scar, visible or not, tells a story. And we probably remember the stories for some of them in exquisite detail, perhaps even if we preferred not to remember them.

In today's Gospel passage Thomas is often used as a whipping boy for his insistence that he would not believe the ridiculous claim of those women with the wild imaginations who insisted Jesus was not dead. Thomas needed proof—seeing is believing.

But what strikes me as more interesting in the reading is that Jesus's body has scars. For some Christians the Resurrection promises a future perfection where all tears are wiped away and suffering is no more. All we need to do now is to wait and to endure. In this version there are no scars.

On the other hand there are some who believe this pie-in-the-sky interpretation is an encouragement of passivity. They focus on the life and compassion of the human Jesus, and for them there may not even be a resurrected body.

But Thomas's acknowledgement of Jesus—"My Lord and my God"—disputes both of these beliefs because of the scars. Jesus did not get those scars because he waited for the coming reign of God. He got them because he embodied the reign of God in the present by bringing good news to the poor, giving sight to the blind, freeing the captives, and challenging economic, political and religious oppression.

The disciples are trembling behind locked doors because of those scars, traumatized by a week beginning in triumph but ending in horrific violence. Only the women, who had so little to lose in

that culture, dared to risk caring for the body of Jesus. They return with a story so outrageous that they are deemed hysterical.

The disciples have good reason to be afraid, because they saw how those scars were given to Jesus, and they fear accusations of guilt by association. They also have good reason to be ashamed, because they saw the scars being inflicted, yet they said nothing, did nothing.

Jesus encourages the disciples to look at and touch his wounds. "Don't be afraid. I told you I would return. It is I." To assure them of his identity and reality, he does not engage them in fond memories of past travels or miracles. He does not delve into further explanations of his parables or the Sermon on the Mount. He simply says, "Behold the scars on my hands and feet."

This is a strange, ironic request. Here is the resurrected savior who embodies the power and glory of God, the man crowned King of kings and Lord of lords. Why would a man who has the power to overcome the grave choose to display the marks of torture and misery?

By revealing his scars Jesus makes an essential affirmation about God. Jesus demonstrates God's love for us through Jesus's willingness to identify with humanity at the most basic level. Jesus identifies with our fragility and our vulnerability, just as he has from his birth.

Of all the ways Jesus could have authenticated his identity and authority, he chose to share his scars. He could have called up an angelic choir to praise him with psalms of exaltation. Instead, he shows the imprint of the nails.

The disciples search for signs of recognition. "Prove to us you are the one." Jesus, however, offers signs of identification. "Look at my scars and know that I am one with you." This story is not just about recognition; it's about identification. The disciples identify Jesus as their Lord since Jesus identifies with them, specifically through their suffering humanity. Is there any other trait of humanity more universally shared than the prevalence of the physical and emotional pains we face in our lifetimes?

We all bear scars from the pains of the past. Perhaps some scars, like Jesus's, were the result of injustice. Sexism, homophobia, classism, poverty or racism leave deep wounds. Others are scarred by violence and abuse that are physical, sexual, emotional or institutional.

And some of us may outwardly appear confident, successful, on top of the world. But underneath the trappings of the good life lie the scars of painful moments of life we have endured or the insecurities that success often begets. We fear that some day, some one, some how will discover things are not as rosy as they appear in our lives. We do not want our concealed scars revealed. Yet the more we hide them, the more anxious we become and the more shame we feel.

But the good news Jesus brings is that we do not need to look away from one another's wounds or to deny our imperfections. God does not ask us to undergo some kind of emotional plastic

surgery to erase our scars. Jesus tells his disciples, "Don't be scared of scars." Look at them. Acknowledge them. More than anything else, our scars are confirmations that we have overcome the trials and obstacles of life. We survived.

The journalist Elizabeth Williams had a five-centimeter bald spot on the back of her head from successful cancer surgery. She was not ashamed of her scar at all. In fact, she wrote, "The things that make us stand out to others can remind us of the most dramatic, heroic moments of our lives." Her eight-year-old daughter, however, often asked her to cover it up, particularly when in public.

One day Williams was surprised and relieved when her daughter came home and told her about a conversation with a friend on the playground. Her friend, a new second grader at the local elementary school, was born without a left hand. One day, holding up a left wrist, the little girl asked her new friend, "Do I freak you out?" And the same little girl, who was so often embarrassed by her mother's scar, calmly replied, "Why would I be freaked out? I love you."

That is the exact same message God speaks to us today. We do not need to be ashamed of our flaws or distraught over our visible and invisible scars. God says to us, "Why would I be freaked out? I love you." Want proof of that love? Look no further than the scarred hands of Jesus, those same scarred hands always reaching out to us, just as we are.