

FMC April 16, 2023
John 20:19-31
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Thomas and the Wounds of Christ

First I have to tell you: I am not focusing on belief and doubt this morning, even though this text is often used to explore that paradox. Easter this year was sandwiched between two mass shootings: the tragedy at Covenant School in Nashville where six people, including three children, were killed and the violence at the bank in Louisville, Kentucky that took the lives of five people and injured eight others. In both instances, the shooter was also killed. As we think about the Biblical story of Thomas and the resurrected Christ, the lens that I want to use is sorrow and grief.

We have all heard the phrase “doubting Thomas.” But Thomas merely voiced the experience of nearly all of the disciples, who also did not believe what they were first told about Jesus’ resurrection. They, too, needed Jesus’ appearance among them in order to truly believe his risen presence was with them.

When Thomas declared, “Unless I see the mark of nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails, and my hand in his side, I will not believe,” he was asking to see what the others had already been shown by Jesus; that is, Jesus’ wounded hands and side.

I believe Thomas’ deeper problem was not doubt; it was grief. Thomas spoke from despair that would not be comforted or consoled. Thomas, perhaps more than the other disciples, had read the times and realized how dangerous Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem really was. Already when Jesus led the disciples back as far as Bethany to raise Lazarus from the dead, Thomas had declared, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” Thomas may have realized what was coming, but he was powerless to prevent Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion. Nor had he proven brave enough to die with Jesus. Like the other disciples, Thomas felt not only grief but fear. Jesus’ crucifixion was a traumatic event.

Pax Romana, the Roman “peace”, relied on the power of coercion and violence to maintain control. Crucifixion, the capital punishment of its day, was not uncommon. Travelers on the road to Jerusalem would be very aware of dead bodies hanging on crosses. The purpose was to intimidate. The Romans would allow them to worship as they pleased, so long as the people remembered that it was really Rome that was in control.

That same culture of intimidation and control maintained through violence permeates our society today. We live among a culture that believes the way to solve problems is to use coercion and violence. The Journal of Urban Health estimates that 4.6 million American children live in a home where at least

one gun is kept loaded. Improperly stored weapons have contributed to school shootings, suicides and the deaths of family members and toddlers. The New England Journal of Medicine reports that firearm deaths occur at a rate more than 5 times higher than drownings. But it isn't just firearms. The culture of violence can be identified in other places: to name a few, the military industrial complex that builds wealth based on weapon sales, the prison system (our country leads the world with the highest incarceration rate), the militarization of our police forces. Nor do our politicians seem to have the will to change anything. They are quick to offer thoughts and prayers but cannot agree on legislation to improve background checks, pass stricter gun control laws, or even provide for more funds for mental health. In Tennessee two Black legislators were expelled for leading protestors in calls for such laws. Although they have been reappointed, laws have not changed in Tennessee or at the national level.

The trauma Thomas experienced resulted from the violent death of his friend and teacher, the man he loved and respected and had followed all the way from Galilee. Thomas grieved. I believe we also need to grieve. I need to grieve. I grieve for the lost children of Uvalde and Nashville, Columbine and Parkland, and all the other places in between. I grieve for lives taken too soon, precious lives created in God's image and loved by God. I grieve for the offenders who chose violence as a way to solve their problems, to end their pain. This Easter season I need to grieve; grief is the accompaniment to Easter hope.

When Jesus appeared to the disciples, and again to Thomas and the disciples a week later, Jesus greeted them with the words, "Peace be with you." We hear those words three times in our text today. This is not the peace of Pax Romana. It is not the peace of militarism or coercion, intimidation or control. It is not "thoughts and prayers" with no substance to make them real. Jesus' act of obedience on the cross gives substance to his words of peace. Jesus will not intimidate. Jesus will not use coercion. Jesus will not inflict violence on others. Instead Jesus will suffer, will experience pain, will forgive, will die. Jesus chooses love. The peace Jesus offers says "Do not fear; do not be afraid; do not be dismayed, for I have overcome the world."

But it is peace with a price. Jesus' resurrected body is not pristine; it bears the wounds, the scars of crucifixion. In her book *Into the Mess & Other Jesus Stories*, Debie Thomas reflects on Jesus' appearance to the disciples as they grieve. She writes, "Jesus presents his scars. He offers his friends his vulnerability—his broken body enlivened and transformed by the high cost of love. He offers them—not a scientific treatise on resurrection, not a dazzling display of pyrotechnics, not an eloquent sermon—but his body. The *narrative* of his body. Its scars, its trials, its losses, its defeats. 'I have

history just as you do', he shows his loved ones in the evidence of his hands and feet. 'I am alive, not just to triumph and victory, but also to pain and sorrow. I don't float somewhere above you, a safe, sanitized distance from where you dwell; I am here *with you* in the searing heart of things where the grace of God makes its home. Touch me. Touch me and see.'" (end quote)

Jesus showed them his wounds, his scars, knowing that we also carry wounds, scars and vulnerabilities. Jesus showed his wounds knowing that we, too, will suffer wounds and scars. Jesus showed his wounds, knowing that wounds and scars are real in this world. We carry them in our bodies, in our hearts, and sometimes we need to grieve. It is also as we carry and share our scars, our wounds, that we embody Christ to those around us.

Quoting Debie Thomas again, "Here is Jesus, holding out to us his hands and his feet, his scars and his hungers, and saying, 'Be my body.' Be my body in the shadow of the lynching trees. Be my body in the institutions of power and influence you inhabit. Be my body in all the locations where hatred, white supremacy, violence and trauma rule the day. Be my body in all times and places where death mocks and diminishes my children, and with the power of the resurrection within you and around you, stand firm and say, enough. Enough. ...The resurrection is God's clarion call to the church. God's insistence that we speak, stand and work for life in a world desperate for fewer crosses, fewer graves, fewer landscapes littered with the desolate and the dead." (end quote)

So what happened to Thomas? He responds to Jesus with the words, "My Lord and my God." In the Gospel of John, this is the climactic expression of belief in Jesus as the Christ. Thomas has combined two words used of God in the Septuagint and applied them to Jesus. Sources outside the Bible and in Christian tradition tell us that Thomas went on to found the church in Syria and India, and likely died a martyr.

As for us, before Jesus died, he gave his disciples a new command. We have been memorizing it in our children's Sunday school. Jesus said, "But I am giving you a new command, You must love each other, just as I have loved you. If you love each other, everyone will know that you are my disciples," Jesus has shown us what love looks like.

We are not called to triumphalism but to service. We are not called to put ourselves first, to take positions of privilege, but to look out for the least, the impoverished, the outsider, the other. We are not called to pretend that everything is rosy and great, but to live and speak truth, to recognize our wounds, our scars, our vulnerabilities. We are not called to enforce our ideas but to love our neighbors, to love each other. Love makes us vulnerable. Sometimes love hurts. Sometimes love

brings grief. But when we reach out to love as Jesus loves us, remembering that Jesus is with us, we also open ourselves to joy, to fellowship, to community, to God's shalom, the wholeness and goodness that God intends for us and for everyone.

Hear these words from the hymn "The Risen Christ" that we are about to sing, "May we, Christ's body walk and serve and stand with the oppressed in this and every land, till all are blessed and can a blessing be, restored in Christ to true humanity." May it be so.