

2 Easter C

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Wounds

The Rev. Deborah J. Woolsey Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

When I was about 9 years old, my aunt gave me one of my favorite gifts: a book of American Sign Language for children. It was a beautiful book, with photographs to help children learn letters, words and sentences in American Sign Language. I devoured the book. In just a few days' time I had mastered the alphabet and even had learned a few sentences. The one I can still remember is: "Good Morning, it's time to get up" (*sign this*). I shared my interest in ASL with my friends at school, and we used it to communicate during class time instead of passing notes. The teachers never caught us.

I can't remember why I was so interested in American Sign Language. Maybe it was because my aunt who gave me the book was a teacher who worked with deaf students and she shared stories about the ways she used ASL. At one time she tried to help me create a sign for my name. She said that when creating a sign for your name, rather than just spelling it out, it was necessary to choose something that is important to you to base it on. You couldn't just pick something you like, it had to be something connected to your identity. My 9 year old self really struggled with this concept, so I asked her for an example. She showed me the ASL sign for Jesus.

Those of you who already know ASL probably know what the sign for Jesus' name is: you point to the middle of your palm with your middle finger from your other hand, then switch, like this (*sign*). She said the sign represents the nails or wounds in his hands. So in ASL, Jesus is known by the marks of his crucifixion. Just like he was in our Gospel this morning.

It might seem strange to us that the Resurrected Jesus still has those crucifixion wounds. We might wonder why they didn't disappear when he was resurrected. But that seems to be an important part of the Mystery of the Resurrection. While we might want to put the horror of the crucifixion behind us and forget all about it, it seems that is not how Resurrection works. The Resurrected One is also the Crucified One, and he still has the wounds to prove it. And in today's Gospel that is exactly how Jesus' disciples recognized him.

There must have been something different about Jesus after he was resurrected because it seems no one, even the people he was close to, recognized him when they first met him. Remember last Sunday, when Mary Magdalene met him outside the tomb she didn't recognize Jesus until he said her name. The disciples who met the Resurrected Jesus on the road to Emmaus didn't recognize him until he broke bread. Today it is his wounds that are what make his disciples recognize him.

This is something unique to John's Gospel; while John's Gospel is the one that included the gory details of the Crucifixion including the nails in his hands and the spear thrust in his side, it is also only in John's Gospel that we have these two scenes where Jesus shows his disciples those very same wounds. These wounds are what helps the disciples go from fear to rejoicing and in Thomas's case from doubting to believing.

Thomas has gotten a pretty bad reputation over the years, being forever known as "Doubting" even though he is the one who called Jesus God after seeing those wounds. So maybe there is more to him. We've seen Thomas in John's Gospel before. He was the one who made a comment about going along with Jesus when Lazarus was sick and died before Jesus could get there. Commentators and scholars can't seem to agree if Thomas showed courage by saying "Let us go also, so that we may die with him." Or if he was being snarky or if he was stating it was dangerous to go to Lazarus. The other time we heard from Thomas is when he asked Jesus the question: "If we do not know where you are going, how will we know the way?" Again, scholars can't seem to agree if Thomas was trying to get more specific information out of Jesus or if he was voicing frustration.

What is interesting is that two times the author of John calls Thomas Didymus, or Twin. There are lots of fascinating theories about whose twin Thomas is, some say he is our twin. Minister and author of several bestselling books John Ortberg has a very interesting observation about Thomas the twin. Orberg notes that in several languages, including ancient Greek, there is a connection between the words for "doubt" and "two". It is similar to the relationship between the word "doubt" and "double" in the English language. Ortberg claims that to doubt is to be of two minds; and that is what Thomas represents in John's Gospel. He is of two minds: wanting to believe but also aware of the very real death and burial of Jesus.

He may have been afraid of being hurt or disappointed, and so could not believe what the other disciples told him when they talked about how Jesus had appeared to them and showed them his wounds when Thomas wasn't with them. His absence that day might be evidence of his double-mindedness.

But to his credit, Thomas was with the disciples the next time Jesus appeared, and Jesus offered Thomas the invitation he gave to no one else: the invitation to examine those wounds himself. Those wounds. Again.

What was it about those wounds that seemed to help Thomas see and believe? According to Bishop Porter Taylor, wounds are a sort of personal history for each of us. Old wounds form scars that can be identifying markers. Such as when Homer's Odysseus returned home after a 20 year absence disguised as an old man, and his nurse recognized him from the scar on his leg. Not only did she know the scar, she knew the story of how he got that scar. Jesus' wounds show that it is Jesus and no one else.

Perhaps Thomas and the other disciples needed that sort of proof because when Jesus appeared to them he did not return angry or violent. He did not remind them of how they had run out on him or abandoned him to the cross. He did not gather them together and plot revenge for what he had suffered. He did not blame them or demand they feel at least a little bit of the terror or pain he felt. He didn't do any of the things we might expect from someone who has been wrongly punished and executed because Jesus was not stuck in his crucifixion. Instead Jesus returned wishing his disciples peace, or wholeness, forgave them, and gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit and commanded them to forgive. That might have been hard to understand and accept; total forgiveness isn't nearly as common in most stories as vengeance is. Those wounds may have helped the forgiven really see and believe Jesus who died is risen and forgives.

Those wounds might just have another purpose too. Those wounds remind us all that resurrection isn't separated from this world we can see and touch and hear and smell and live in. A world that is filled with beauty and pain. Jesus' wounds can remind us that through Jesus' resurrection God didn't wipe out this world, God is beginning to redeem this world. God isn't going to magically rescue any of us from difficult, painful, hurtful, or tragic situations. We all still can be wounded physically, emotionally, and psychologically. However when we look at our own wounds we can now know we are not alone; Jesus is wounded too. Those wounds connect us, and therefore Jesus' wish for wholeness, for peace, is for us too.

Jesus wounds and his gift of peace also show us in the redeeming work of resurrection that while Jesus was recognized by his wounds he was not defined or limited by them. The resurrected Jesus was about a new way of living in a world that will not necessarily spare us pain, a world that can't understand what love and peace and forgiveness are unless it experiences them, which is why not only Jesus but all of us need to live in hope of this redemption by loving and forgiving and working for wholeness. For us, that can mean that no matter what wounds we might have: literal, figurative, emotional, physical or otherwise, we don't have to be defined by or limited by them. Those wounds can be wisdom lessons or reminders of our connection to Christ, or they can just become part of us by guiding us toward forgiveness and wholeness. Which means as we live into wholeness and forgiveness, those wounds, might become beautiful messages of hope. It is not fast and easy work, that is for sure, but it is the Easter work of transformation that we can choose to be part of.