

2 Easter John 20:19-31
Christ and Grace April 28, 2019
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When we read a good novel – we sometimes long for that life of riches, or the excitement that comes along with fame, or that beautiful love story; we want the perfect ending, to live happily ever after... but any good novel tells us the whole story, tells us the parts of life that are hard or sad or filled with fear, and that's what makes the good parts stand out and bring such joy.

When we read scripture, the same thing can happen. We want a burning bush like Moses to help us discern our call. We want a story that ends like that of Ruth and Naomi, those strong women who overcame cultural stereotypes to live in peace. We want a second chance at life like Lazarus or the riches of David, the evangelism successes of Peter and Paul, the faithfulness of Mary the mother of Jesus. Heaven forbid, some of us even want to be the Proverbs 31 woman!

We want to believe that if we are just good enough Christians, if we do and believe and say the right things, put in enough devotional time and mission work, then the story of our relationship with God will end happily ever after. But the truth is, scripture is also filled with stories of loss and hardship, plagues and illness, famines and wars, betrayal and infidelity. The truth is, whether it's scripture or novels or our very real lives, it's all made up of challenges and celebrations, losing and winning, doubting and believing.

Last week was Easter, the church was filled, and we rejoiced in the resurrection. The tomb is empty, Christ is risen, death has been defeated, love wins, and nothing on earth will ever be the same again. Right? Only it's been a week and for most of us our lives haven't changed all that much. We find that we are a whole lot like the disciples. Back to being afraid, back to not understanding the works of God, back to wondering if we can really believe this story at all.

Welcome to the Week After. The week after Easter lilies, chocolate bunnies, egg hunts, and the Hallelujah Chorus. This is the point in the liturgical year when we take a good, hard look at God's post-resurrection world, and think, "Now what?" Or, if we're painfully, brutally honest: "So what?"

The Gospel reading this week reminds us that the resurrection story honors these questions. The story is not only glorious, but also messy, and complicated. If you struggle with the story, you are not alone. In fact, struggle seems to be intrinsic to this story that reflects what real life looks like after the empty tomb.

As Christians we accept stories of failure and defeat, sin and challenges, but we don't want the story to end there. We want the enemy defeated, the race to be won, the sin confessed and absolved, and the wounds healed. But Jesus appears to his disciples in a body that is resurrected and still wounded. His wounds remind us that sometimes pain, loss, and trauma are for keeps and that no amount of prayer or piety will take them away. Some wounds remain, even after resurrection.

Jesus' resurrected body retained its scars. Not old scars. Not neat, faded scars signaling a long-ago victory, but fresh wounds still raw enough to allow a doubting disciple to place his fingers inside. I imagine Jesus winced when Thomas touched him, but that wincing, that pain, that openness, signaled real life. Real engagement. Real presence. It spoke the very words Thomas and the rest of us hunger for the most, "I am here. I am here with you in your doubts and with your wounds"

We live in a culture that worships bodily perfection. Commercials market products for weight loss, shiny hair, smooth skin, white teeth, and all the clothing and other adornments that will make our bodies perfect, without blemish or scars. But if Jesus showed his open wounds without shame or apology, then maybe we don't need to worry so much about glossy presentation. Maybe Christianity's best appeal is in its willingness to embrace real bodies, real scars, real pain.

In his resurrection, Jesus honored the body. He honored the bruised, broken, wounded, and disabled body. He honored the real-life bodies in which we live. No, our wounds aren't pretty, and no, they don't tell the whole story of who we are. But the stories they do tell are holy.

Because we are wounded bodies, imperfect and scarred, we sometimes struggle with our faith, especially when our story doesn't seem as glorious as the ones we read about in scripture or as glamorous as the ones portrayed in the media, or on the pages of our current novel. We doubt, we second-guess, we want some kind of proof – no less than the disciples – that Jesus is truly risen from the dead and that it matters in our lives.

Thomas is part of a community of faith, but he openly voices his doubts, he wants physical proof, needing to see the risen Jesus himself. Some say he was stubborn or weak in faith, but maybe, like the rest of us, he longed for his own encounter with Jesus. Perhaps Thomas needed to know that Jesus knew something about the wounds of life, that Jesus knew something about his wounds.

I think Thomas has given us a gift, if we are willing to acknowledge that honest doubt can be a gift. You see Thomas has modeled for us how to take our doubt right into our community of faith, without shame or guilt. As a community we wrestle with our doubts together, even as we tend to one another's wounds, and share the stories that strengthen us as individuals and as community. When we do this, we are blessed. We can then say to others what Jesus said to those first disciples, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Come to believe – it's an ongoing process that can take us our whole lives.

Believing is not about being able to explain or prove the Resurrection. It's about trusting that even with our wounds, even in our doubts, Jesus is present to us in exactly the way we most need him, willing to wait until we are ready to see his wounds and show him our own. The encounter between doubting Thomas and the Risen Jesus is not really a story about believing in the fact of the resurrection but a story about believing that someone could be wounded and also resurrected at the same time. It is never the creeds or the doctrines that save us; it is our relationship with the One who accepts us exactly as we are, wounds and all.

And then Jesus sends us out to share the peace and forgiveness and healing of God with all the wounded and doubting ones who have not yet heard this beautiful story. The resurrection story never ends, and so as we move forward from the empty tomb we turn the page and start the next chapter, trusting that the risen Christ is with us always. Amen

I am indebted to Debi Thomas for much of this sermon.

Debi Thomas <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2179>