

The Scars of Thomas
John 20:19-31
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The Methodists, studying John Wesley's work that lies at the foundation of their denominational history, came up with a clever way of organizing their theological reflection. They call it the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. Essentially, this methodology suggests that our attempts to understand and ponder God are rooted in four sources, and an appropriately deep and meaningful understanding of God should be built on all four of those sources. The sources are Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience. I've taught multiple lessons on the Wesleyan Quadrilateral; it's a fascinating and helpful structure for organizing our divine thoughts, and it's worth more than the paragraph I'm going to give it in this sermon.

I was reminded of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral preparing for today because of that last quadrant, the source known as Experience. Wesley argued—and I'm no Methodist scholar, but I think I have this right—Wesley argued that experience is an extraordinarily critical component of determining what we believe, perhaps even more critical than the sources of tradition or reason. If, for instance, you are taught that a human being cannot fly and then you get in an airplane, the experience of flight will overrule the logic you have been taught. In Wesley's own words, because he's just so eloquent: "Our experience of what now passes in our own soul will be the best comment on what is delivered to us."¹

If Wesley got it right, then we are wise to trust our experiences when it comes to making sense of life, of faith, and of God. Of course, today's scripture reading reminds us, through the character of Thomas, that sometimes clinging to the source of experience can lead to scars.

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Many of you know that I have a younger sister, Chrissy, who is also working in ministry, serving as the children's minister at the church where we grew up. I also have two nieces who fall between the ages of my own children. There are not a lot of Y-chromosomes present when our family gets together.

When Chrissy was pregnant with my oldest niece, Clara, she learned about halfway through that Clara had a congenital diaphragmatic hernia. The complications of such a diagnosis are immense and thorny, and the second half of Chrissy's pregnancy was an exhausting roller coaster of doctor's appointments, cautionary diagnoses, and general uncertainty. As a man, the ultimate toil of any pregnancy is beyond me, but I think the time that Chrissy spent carrying Clara was particularly challenging.

A congenital diaphragmatic hernia is basically a hole in the diaphragm that develops in utero. Clara's hole was big enough that some of the organs that should have developed in her gut slipped through that hole and into her chest cavity, limiting (among other things) her lung development. This meant that there were, specifically, two huge fears for Clara. The second was that she would never really develop, never live a normal life, never experience the joy and the wonder and beauty of the world. And the first fear was that she would never live at all, that Chrissy would only know motherhood for a few moments or days or weeks.

¹ Wesley, John. [Letter to Dr. Conyers Middleton, 4 January 1749](#), Works, X, 79.

In the final months leading up to Clara's birth, my family—but especially my sister—lived in a suspended state somewhere between belief and disbelief, wanting to trust that Clara would join our family and live a full life while knowing that sometimes that's just not how things play out. The limbo was exhausting, but there was nowhere else to go.

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Whenever I read a passage from the post-crucifixion sections of the gospel, I can't help but imagine how desperate the disciples would have felt. In the story from today's reading—which takes place on "the first day of the week," very soon after the crucifixion—the disciples are gathered in a house with the doors locked and the windows barred. They are living as if they are under siege. They likely had been waiting for a last-second miracle to keep Jesus off the cross, and instead they have watched as he was laid in a tomb.

The disciples found themselves drowning in a whirlwind of emotions, none of them positive. They would have been confused, shocked, overwhelmed, scattered, angry, disconsolate, and mourning. Perhaps more than anything, they would have been unsure about what to do next. They had believed that Jesus would triumph over death and then had watched as death had—temporarily, it turns out—triumphed instead.

They would have had so many questions. Would they next be arrested, tried, and executed themselves? Would they scatter and live separate, possibly even mundane lives on their own? Would they continue to stay in touch, to stay close, to preach, maybe to perform the occasional miracle? Would they go to temple? In the scene we look at today, they can't even leave the house...so while they may have asked these questions and others, there's no way they could have begun to answer them.

Then, out of nowhere, Jesus appears. The disciples are already shaken and confused and don't know what to believe except that, they think, Jesus has died. His death is the one certainty that they can trust...and when Jesus appears, even that certainty disappears. They are jubilant, of course, thrilled to see his face and touch his body, hopeful beyond hope and shedding tears of joy...but the confusion, I suspect, remains. The ambiguity of the future looms larger than ever before.

They were living in limbo, exhausted, but with nowhere else to go.

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Forsyth County, where I grew up and where my sister and her family still live, has two primary hospitals. One of the hospitals, Forsyth, hosts the only maternity ward in the county. The other hospital, Baptist, hosts one of the premier neonatal wards in the country. This baffling setup means that my sister delivered baby Clara at Forsyth, then watched as Clara was whisked across town to Baptist for immediate surgery while Chrissy remained at Forsyth receiving post-delivery care. Chrissy was exceedingly desperate to get out of there. I doubt that the mother of a newborn was ever discharged more quickly.

Clara's surgery was, as you might expect, extensive. They made a cut down the side of her abdomen, moved the internal organs back in place, sewed up the hole in her diaphragm with a patch, and then closed the external hole. She then went on an ECMO machine which basically breathed for her because her lungs were critically underdeveloped. And so we waited, often in the hospital—Chrissy and her husband Robert became close friends with the doctors and nurses and techs on that ward.

Some days it seemed like Clara was doing pretty well. Other days, it seemed like she was struggling. There were definitely moments where it was hard to believe that the future would be what we wanted.

One of the hardest parts of it all, for Chrissy, was that she couldn't touch her baby. Every new mother I've ever encountered revels in the chance to hold life in her arms instead of in her belly. In the first weeks and then months of Clara's life, Chrissy didn't have that chance. She didn't get to touch.

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Other than in a list of names, poor Thomas shows up in the Christian gospels only in John. He gets what appears like a throwaway line in the Lazarus story and a brief question at the Last Supper, and then he gets today's narrative. Because this final episode is our primary exposure to him, he gets nicknamed "Doubting Thomas," with his doubt being most of what we contemplate about him, as if he were a consistently cynical man who constantly raised an eyebrow at Jesus' teaching and remained skeptical of his miracles throughout.

I favor a more charitable reading of Thomas, one that characterizes his doubt as more an effect of his circumstances than of his personality. *All* of the disciples were confused and lost, *all* of them were afraid and hiding, *all* of them were certain that Jesus had died. *All* had seen the body go into the tomb.

Then Jesus appears in the room and those who are gathered believe. Thomas, apparently out picking up dinner or running errands or something, isn't present and doesn't believe. It takes an encore appearance to sway him. When this happens, Jesus chastises him, saying "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

The question for me was always, "Why doesn't Jesus chastise everyone else, too? They also didn't believe until they saw Jesus walk among them, saw the wounds on his body. Why does Jesus pick on Thomas?" It is an ineffable element of Christ, a question without answer.

Sometimes, it seems that Thomas gets singled out for his desire to touch the risen Christ. In the first locked room appearance, the other disciples see the scars on Jesus' hands and side, but the text does not tell us that they touched him. When they share their experience with Thomas, he says that he wants to see the scars and also to touch them, making that a requirement for his belief.

One of the key words in Thomas's assertion is this last word, the word we translate as "believe." In the Greek, the root word is *pistis*, and while "believe" is a perfectly good translation, *pistis* is not a primarily cognitive word. Instead, *pistis* suggests that someone experiences sureness in every possible way, with head and heart and gut and soul, belief that incorporates but transcends logic, belief that encompasses but outdistances emotion.² It is also the word at the root of our understanding of faith. *Pistis* suggests that we have a relationship with the things that we believe, that we believe with all that we are and all that we have, even that love is part of the things that we believe. It suggests a belief where experience outweighs reason.

² "Faith," Abarim Publications, <https://www.abarim-publications.com/DictionaryG/p/p-e-i-th-om.html>.

Thomas wants to believe, but perhaps even more than that, he wants to experience, to see with his own eyes and touch with his own hands.

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After several up-and-down months that collectively amounted to some progress, my sister got to touch and hold her baby. Clara was still in the hospital, but she had made enough progress and come off enough machines that Chrissy could touch her again. The first thing I remember Chrissy touching is the scar on Clara's side where the doctors had made the incision. It had been two months, and while Clara's insides still had a ways to go, the stitches had come out of her skin and the external wound had closed back up. Chrissy gently and slowly ran her fingers down the side of Clara's two-month-old belly, feeling the skin that had been cut just hours after emerging from the womb. I can't know for sure what my sister was thinking, but I like to assume that she was realizing that the thing that may have saved Clara's life had also scarred her for life. And I like to think that she was also aware of her own scars—the literal scars she carried from the delivery and the emotional scars that ran deep over those past several months, back to the middle of the pregnancy, and that would continue throughout the rest of her life.

One of the first things I remember Chrissy saying that she wanted to teach my niece was to be proud of her scar (something she has accomplished with overwhelming success). I have no idea if my sister has been able to find a way to be proud of her own. I feel like that would be a much more challenging endeavor.

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The scripture never says that Thomas actually touches Jesus. Jesus does reappear, Jesus invites Thomas to touch him, Thomas articulates his belief, and Jesus says that Thomas saw and believed...but there's no reference to Thomas actually touching Jesus' scars. Still, I feel confident that the touch happened, in part because Thomas has no reason to decline Jesus' invitation and in part because Thomas has so deeply yearned for the totality of an encounter with Jesus. It's something we'd expect of anyone. (You just know that Peter is in the background asking for his turn after Thomas is done.) Thomas is craving an experience that will allow him to believe, to have *pistis*, to know with every single fiber of his being that Jesus is here before him.

Thomas, more than anything, desires an experience that will put him literally in touch with Christ. He wants to experience Christ with body, mind, heart, and soul. It is the same thing that each of us craves—with Christ, certainly, but also with anything else that we love, trust, and value. With anything else and anyone else we have faith in and believe in.

The experience of touching Christ's scars is not one from which Thomas will emerge unscathed. Because he has asked to experience Christ fully, Jesus will reprimand him—again, only him. I can't imagine what Thomas felt like in that moment of rebuke. All he asked for was what everyone else had already encountered, that and for the chance to touch Jesus one more time, to believe with his body as well as his mind and soul. And yet the request leads him to be rebuked and to carry the weight of that rebuke with him going forward.

Sometimes someone else's physical scars affect us far more deeply than our own.

Thomas will go on to travel throughout Asia, planting churches along the way. He will live one of the longest lives of all the disciples, working somewhat alone compared to the rest of them. He will continue in faith up to his martyrdom. His scars seem to give him strength.

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After three months—78 days, I think—Chrissy and Robert finally brought Clara home from the hospital. Clara has continued to grow in stature and in wisdom. Her lungs sometimes get tired, but for the most part, she is living the life of a very normal 11-year-old, playing with her sister and friends, running and singing and shouting to her heart's content. She is a delight and a handful. Often when I talk with her, I don't even quite remember the trauma of her first three months on Earth. She has totally eclipsed our initial greatest fears...but the experience and its scars continue to be a very real part of our story.

Our experiences lie at the heart of our faith precisely because they are so real. When we say, "that got real," we're almost never talking about something that was sunshine, lollipops and rainbows. Our experiences include standing by others as they are scarred, and they obviously include our own scars as well. But our scars are what give us the ability to have faith with all that we have, with all that we are. They allow us to believe.