

“THE SCARS REMAIN”
Acts 3:12-19; Luke 24:36b-48
A Sermon by John Thomason
Woodbury UMC
April 18, 2021

This is now the third Sunday of Easter. We as a church would like to think that the sad events of Holy Week are now in the distant past. Christ has been raised from the dead; “happy days are here again” and are here to stay. We’re rolling merrily along on the resurrection highway, and the cross is receding in our rear-view mirror.

But today’s two Scripture readings suggest otherwise. Both are set after Easter and give clear evidence of Jesus’ resurrection; and yet, both passages call prominent attention to his crucifixion. So, here we are today, bathed in the light of what happens to Jesus on Easter Sunday. But then we are pushed back into the darkness of what happens to Jesus on Good Friday. The timing and the emphasis seem to be a bit off. We’re living in the good ol’ days, but we’re called to remember the bad ol’ days.

In our reading from the Book of Acts, the apostle Peter heals a man who is lame. The bystanders who witness this event are filled with wonder and think Peter must be some sort of superman. But in his sermon which follows, Peter makes it clear that he possesses no special power in and of himself. It is the power of the risen Christ working through him that accomplishes the miracle. Peter affirms that Christ has been “raised from the dead” (Acts 3:15a) and “glorified” (v. 13a), and that “his name itself has made this man strong” (v. 16). So far, this sounds like a message about Easter, pure and simple.

But notice that much of Peter’s sermon is actually focused on the events of Good Friday; and even more ominously, it accuses his listeners, who are Jewish, of orchestrating these events. Peter says that this glorified Jesus is the one “you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life” (vv. 13b-15a). Doesn’t this sound like Peter is rubbing it in? In the context of our Christian New Testament, doesn’t this sermon even sound anti-Semitic, like Peter is blaming the Jews for being Christ-killers? The preacher makes an unexpected shift – from talking about what God does to Jesus on Easter Sunday to talking about what God’s people do to Jesus on Good Friday. Jesus is alive and triumphant, but the suffering and death of Jesus – and who causes it – are all over this sermon.

Then we come to our Gospel lesson, where Christ appears to the disciples after his resurrection. He seems to be a strange, supernatural figure; at first, the disciples aren’t comforted by his presence, they’re confused and terrified. Because he just shows up out of nowhere and looks different somehow from an ordinary mortal, they think he is a ghost. So Jesus asks them to look beyond his resurrected body to his crucified body. He takes them right back to the bad ol’ days, to the anguish of Good Friday; he shows them the wounds in his hands and side.

In part, Jesus does this so there will be no case of mistaken identity. He is not some spooky visitor from heaven, but the man with whom they have shared life for three years and whose death they have recently witnessed. “Look at my hands and my feet,” he says; “see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have” (Luke 24:39).

Jesus stands before the disciples in the glory of his resurrection, but he identifies himself by showing them the marks of his crucifixion. They recognize him for who he is and are overjoyed; but this happens only when he shows them his scars.

Which raises a fascinating question: why does the risen Christ still carry scars? One might suppose that when Jesus is raised to new life, the scars of his death would disappear, that his imperfect body would be transformed into a perfect body. Isn't this the hope we have for our loved ones and for ourselves when we die? If the resurrected life is free of pain and sorrow, shouldn't it also be free of the marks of that pain and sorrow? Shouldn't our scars be erased, or at least conveniently hidden?

You and I know this scenario well from our experience of wakes and funerals. When a person dies from a ravaging illness or an act of violence, his or her body is often disfigured; it carries the scars of suffering. The body is taken to a funeral home to be prepared for a final viewing. The goal of the mortician is to do a cosmetic cover-up, to hide the evidence of trauma, to make the deceased look as normal as possible.

In one of my previous pastorates, a struggling single mother and her two young boys came under the care of our church family. The mother was a volatile, fragile person, addicted to drugs and subject to drastic mood swings. Eventually, life became too much for her to handle, and one day she hung herself from a ceiling fan in their family living room. The older son discovered her body. The day before the funeral he told me that his mother had terrible red marks on her neck where the rope had been fixed. He and I both wondered how the mortician would deal with that. When I saw her body in the coffin, I realized what the mortician had done. He had dressed her in an outfit with a high neckline and placed a scarf around her neck. Apparently, he had not been able to erase the scars, so he simply hid them.

You and I all carry scars, and not just the scars we get from dying, but also the scars we get from living. We bear the natural marks of aging, and the unnatural marks of things that happen to us as we age – accidents and failures and disappointments too great to number.

Sometimes we carry our scars as a badge of honor. Rachel Hollis, a TV personality and author, once posted an Instagram photo of herself that went viral with this caption: "I have stretch marks, and I wear a bikini . . . because I'm proud of this body and every mark on it . . . They aren't scars, ladies, they're stripes, and you've earned them." In one of his novels, Graham Greene depicts a woman who notices what used to be a wound on her lover's shoulder and contemplates the advancing wrinkles in his face: "I thought of the lines life had put on his face, as personal as a line of writing – I thought of a scar on his shoulder that wouldn't have been there if once he hadn't tried to protect another man from a falling wall. The scar was part of his character, and I knew I wanted that scar to exist through all eternity."

And so, some of our scars are testimony to the maturity we have achieved and the good we have done, and we wear these scars with pride. But other scars are evidence of our broken dreams and bad behavior, and we wear them with shame.

I recently watched Ken Burns' 3-part documentary on the life and work of Ernest Hemingway, perhaps the greatest American writer of the 20th Century. Hemingway was revealed to be an incredibly complex human being – immensely talented but deeply tormented. He lived

hard, drank hard, and was hard on other people. He could be charming one moment and cruel the next.

Hemingway led an active life that often put him in perilous situations, and he suffered a number of physical injuries along the way. He endured several head concussions; he survived two small plane crashes on consecutive days. Even when he wasn't living dangerously, he seemed to be a magnet for trouble. One day in his bathroom in Paris, he pulled a skylight down on his head thinking he was pulling on a toilet chain. This left him with a prominent scar on his forehead, which he carried for the rest of his life. Whenever he was asked about the scar, he was always reluctant to answer.

Hemingway carried many other scars as well, some visible, some invisible – scars resulting from his mother's rigidity and harshness, his father's depression and suicide, plus his own alcoholism, mental illness, and marital failures. For all his robust living, Hemingway was always obsessed with dying, always lived on the precipice of death, and in the end committed suicide himself.

I was surprised by my own reaction to Hemingway's story. In spite of the demons he battled and the chaos he created, I felt empathy for him. He was a prodigy who became a prodigal; but in the final analysis, he was only human. He bore ugly scars, but who am I to judge? So do I. So do you.

And, by the grace of God, so does the risen Jesus. Amazing! What's even more amazing, the Gospel writers tell us that instead of hiding his scars, Jesus reveals them. Of course, he does this to prove his identity to his disciples; but is it possible that he does it for another reason as well?

Phillip Yancey has written of the healing ministry of Dr. Paul Brand, a medical missionary to India. At the time Brand arrived in Vellore, he and his workers were among the few in the area who would touch or even closely approach a person with leprosy. Townspeople always quarantined lepers. A year ago, none of us knew what it feels like to be quarantined, but now we do know.

Well, one day Brand slipped in late to a gathering of patients, sitting on a mat at the edge of an open courtyard. The air was heavy with the combined odors of crowded bodies, stale spices, and treated bandages. The patients insisted on a few words from Dr. Brand, and he reluctantly agreed. He stood for a moment, empty of ideas, looking at the patients before him. His eyes were drawn to their hands, dozens of them, most pulled inward in the familiar "leprosy claw-hand," some with no fingers, some with a few stumps. Many patients sat on their hands or otherwise hid them from view.

"I am a hand surgeon," he began. "So when I meet people, I can't help looking at their hands. The palm reader claims he can tell your future by looking at your hands. I can tell your past. For instance, I can tell what your trade has been by the position of your callouses and the condition of your fingernails. I can tell a lot about your character. I love hands."

He paused and looked at the eager faces, then continued. "How I would love to have had the chance to meet Christ and study his hands. But knowing what he was like, I can almost picture them, feel them."

Dr. Brand paused again, then wondered aloud what it would have been like to meet Christ and study his hands. He traced the hands of Christ chronologically, beginning with infancy when his hands were small, helpless, and grasping. Then came the hands of the boy Jesus, clumsily holding a brush or stylus, trying to form letters of the alphabet. Then the hands of Christ the carpenter – rough, gnarled, with broken fingernails and bruises from working with a saw and hammer.

Then there were the hands of Christ the physician, the healer. Compassion and sensitivity seemed to radiate from them, so much so that when he touched people they could feel something of the divine Spirit coming through. Christ dared to touch the diseased, the blind, the needy.

“Then,” continued Dr. Brand, “there were his crucified hands. It hurts me,” he said, “to think of a nail being driven through the center of my hand, because I know what goes on there, the tremendous complex of tendons and nerves and blood vessels and muscles. It’s impossible to drive a spike through its center without crippling it. The thought of those healing hands being crippled reminds me,” he said, “of what Christ was prepared to endure. In that act he identified himself with all the deformed and crippled human beings in the world. Not only was he able to endure poverty with the poor, weariness with the tired, but clawed hands with the crippled.”

As Brand spoke, the effect on the listening patients, all social outcasts, was electrifying. Jesus . . . a cripple, with claw-hands like theirs?

Brand continued: “And then there were his resurrected hands. One of the things I find most astounding,” he said, “is that though we think of the future life as something perfected, when the risen Christ appeared to his disciples he said, ‘Look at my hands . . . touch and see’ – and those hands were still nail-scarred! Why did the risen Christ want to keep the wounds of his humanity? Wasn’t it because he wanted to carry back to heaven an eternal reminder of the sufferings of those here on earth? He carried the marks of suffering with him so he could continue to understand the needs of those who suffer. He wanted to be forever one with us.”

Friends, the scars in Jesus' hands and side, which he earns when he brings healing to all of us, are not blotted out by the resurrection. His scars are the surest sign of his love for us, his identification with us, and the source of his divine glory. "Crown him the Lord of love, behold his hands and side, those wounds, yet visible above, in beauty glorified." Because his scars remain, our scars become more beautiful and bearable.