

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter (A)

### *Jesus of the Scars*

#### John 20:19-31

*The Oxford Dictionary* defines a *scar* as, 'a permanent mark on the skin from a wound; emotional damage from grief etc.; sign of damage.'

We all have scars of some kind, whether physical or emotional. Scars not only mark us but tell a story. I wonder what stories your scars tell – stories of pain and heartache... but there may also be stories of hope and triumph, of lessons learned and adversity overcome. Then there's the question of what we choose to do with our scars. Some we may bear with ease. Others we may hide or even have removed, and yet others may have become a gift.

Another question comes to mind. What will God do when the time comes for us to receive what Saint Paul calls a resurrected body an imperishable or spiritual body. Will we still carry the blemishes and the damage that we incur over a lifetime? Will the scars remain, or will they be removed? It may seem a trivial question, but it was relevant to the disciples that evening when Jesus came to them.

Jesus stands among them and says, 'Peace be with you.' They don't immediately recognise him. Then he shows him his scars. Now they know him. His scars aren't superficial cuts and bruises. These are the deep wounds of the cross – terrible wounds of human betrayal, torture, humiliation, and an agonising death.

The disciples recognise Jesus by his scars. This goes against our picture of perfection, but the risen Jesus still bears these ugly marks. They are a part of who he is. When he was raised from the dead, the cross wasn't left behind. The risen Christ is also the Christ who suffered and was crucified. The resurrection and the cross are inseparable.

Christian art has portrayed this through the centuries. Countless images of the risen Jesus show the marks of suffering never effaced but carried into risen glory. Such art conveys a deep truth and a profound hope. It says to us that the triumphant and risen Christ is a Christ who suffers with us. Jesus may be risen from the dead, but he still shares our pain and suffering. The cross has left Jesus scared and wounded for eternity.

Thomas was absent from this encounter with Jesus, and when he was told about it he declared, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.' We tend to give Thomas a hard time, labelling him doubting Thomas. But I suspect there's a Thomas in many of us. He reminds us that questions and doubts form a part of our faith journey. He also reminds us that it's in Jesus' scars and wounds we see who God is – God as vulnerable, suffering love.

After the First World War, when people were struggling to come to terms with the immensity of suffering and carnage that war always inflicts, Edward Shillito (1872–1948), wrote a poem called *Jesus of the Scars*. He reflected on how Jesus showed his friends his hands and his side. 'Our wounds are hurting us' he says and seeks the balm – the consolation and healing – and prays, 'Lord Jesus, by Thy Scars, we claim Thy grace.' Then, drawing us into that room on the evening of the first Easter Day, he writes:

If, when the doors are shut, Thou drawest near,  
Only reveal those hands, that side of Thine;  
We know to-day what wounds are, have no fear,  
Show us Thy Scars, we know the countersign.

The other gods were strong; but Thou wast weak;  
They rode, but Thou didst stumble to a throne;  
But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak,  
And not a god has wounds, but Thou alone.

'To our wounds only God's wounds can speak...'

The resurrected Jesus shows himself to his frightened, bewildered, wondering disciples, by showing his scars. His resurrected body carry the marks of his suffering. He is Jesus of the scars – scars that testified to the depths of his love. The Wounded, Scarred One is now the Resurrected One. But the Resurrected One is still the Wounded and Scarred One. It's contrary to how the world sees things. Sharon Brown, who is a novelist, puts it well:

In a Botox world where perfection is pursued and idolized, wounds and scars are ugly and shameful. Our culture says, Numb the pain. Erase it. Or at least, cover it up. Conceal it... But the testimony of Easter is that suffering isn't erased from Jesus' resurrected body. His wounds have been made glorious. They point to what he has done and how the Father has been glorified in the suffering, death, and resurrection of the Son. The wounds tell the story of our salvation and God's victory over the forces of evil, of death. Life wins.<sup>1</sup>

The medieval Persian sage, Rumi, capture it, when he wrote, 'The wound is the place where the Light enters you.'

Jesus invited Thomas to touch his wounds, but seeing the scars Thomas knew this was Jesus, and makes his declaration of faith, 'My Lord and my God!' In telling this story, John knows that this isn't an option for us. Yet, we receive a blessing, 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.' Blessed are those who trust, even without seeing. This blessing reaches over the centuries to us today.

We are blessed because God in whom we trust is God who is wounded and scarred by pain and suffering. Our God suffers with us, sharing fully in our experience. God does may not erase our scars, or the pain that underlie them, but the resurrected Jesus says, I am with you. Life will win. Love will triumph. Here is a place where my light can enter.

Earlier in this story, John tells of how Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit on the disciples. It's the creation of the church, the body of Christ. If we're to be at all like the one who created us – if we're to reflect our Lord – which is our calling – then we must own that we're a wounded people. We have scar tissue everywhere, even though we may pretend it's not so. If the Easter faith is to prevail it won't be through a church that pretends to have a perfect, unblemished body, but a community which bears living witness to the marks of suffering and pain, of questions and doubts – for to our wounds,

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<sup>1</sup> Sharon Garlough Brown, *An Extra Mile. A Story of Embracing God's Call* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 274

God's wounds can speak. Perhaps Christ's invitation to Thomas to touch the scars on his body is the invitation to each of us to experience the presence of Christ by touching the scars in our own lives.

As we proclaim Jesus risen from the dead and celebrate his victory, may his wounds speak to our wounds. May Jesus of the Scars breath his resurrected life into us that our wounds may be transformed into sources of light.

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