

Everybody's Wounded
John 20:19-31
Second Sunday of Easter

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¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "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."

²⁶A week later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ²⁹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

The Sermon

They were walking in the Alabama countryside on a grey afternoon when they rounded a corner and she saw the ramshackle, abandoned house she had left when she was little.

Forrest Gump and Jenny have just stumbled onto Jenny's childhood home.ⁱ

She looked like she had just been startled by the sudden appearance of someone she never wanted to see again as they stopped at the foot of the long dirt pathway that led up to the front porch.

Her mama had died when she was very small, and it was known that her father drank too much and had paid the worst kind of attention to her and her sisters, and eventually, she had been taken from that home to go live with a grandmother.

And now, Jenny marched purposefully toward that terrible house; Forrest stayed behind, watching.

When she got to about 20 feet from the porch, she stopped again. She stood for a second. And then, with all her strength, she took off her shoes and threw them at the house. When the shoes were gone, she grabbed a rock and smashed a window, raging through clenched teeth: "How could you do those *things*?" She threw rocks until there were none left to throw, and crumpled onto the muddy path.

Forrest came closer, not saying a word—what are you going to say?—and with nothing else to be done, he sat down next to her in the mud.

"Sometimes," he narrates in the voiceover, "I guess there just aren't enough rocks."

I knew a pastor who was widely regarded as not having an entirely effective pastorate; the annual congregational review of his compensation was a cringe-worthy exercise in dysfunction. He was a good guy at heart, and had a decent sense of humor; his preaching wasn't terrible. But people didn't feel like they could relate to him, or that he was able to open up to them.

Only later was I told—by someone else—that he carried with him a clear memory from when he was a toddler and his mother made the decision to walk out of his life forever.

There's been a belief, in some circles—and I have no idea where it ever came from—that churches were supposed to be places where people aren't wounded; or if they are, then they're supposed to just get up and get over their wounds, since God is good, wise and powerful, and people who believe in God are supposed to be

unflappable and confident and pleasant and prosperous and pleased with themselves.

Some people will say that if you really believe in Jesus Christ, you ought to smile all the time, even in your loss, even in agony, even in the pain of feeling trampled on, or the sometimes more intense pain of feeling like you have trampled on someone else and they are stretching out the torment of not forgiving you. Or whatever.

Always there will be those—and they are well-meaning—who will say, “Come on, just get over it.”

They’re like the minister who came to the hospital where the elderly woman had just been bereaved of a lifetime’s loved one, and he said, “Don’t be sad, Mary.”

Like the friends of the family who judged Fred Craddock when he was a little boy because there was deep sorrow in the household in the aftermath of a loss, and they said, “If you were a Christian, you wouldn’t be so sad, because you’d know God’s promise of eternal life.”

Like those who say it’s all God’s will, and you’re not supposed to question anything that happens to you, as in the classic Presbyterian joke about the Calvinist who was banged up in a fall down a flight of stairs and, since everything is predestined, said to himself, “Thank God that’s over with.” (I’m afraid we are contractually obligated to repeat that joke at least once every lectionary cycle—so thank God *that’s* over with.)

Like the friends of Job who, in his time of entirely unprovoked, utter devastation, came and said to him, You must have done something to deserve this; you should be thankful it isn’t even worse; and how dare you question God’s goodness by your complaining.

Like me, when my adviser in a process before ordination called Clinical Pastoral Education mentioned an unhappy episode from my youth, and I smiled, and he said (God bless him), “Every time something unhappy in your life comes up, you smile. Smiling is for happy. What are you smiling about?” And I had no answer, other than the realization that when I instinctively did that, I was giving him and the rest of the world a bunch of baloney.

When we tell people (including ourselves?) not to be wounded, we are adopting the public relations tactic of the abuser who inflicts injury that can be covered up with makeup, or a sweater, or a lame story that you so badly want to be true though you know it is false—“Silly me, I fell onto a doorknob; I burned my hand on the stove; I was opening up an umbrella and it caught me right under my eye...”

They say, “Don’t be sad; ignore pain; don’t express your sorrow; hide your scars, plaster on a smile, and for heaven’s sake don’t question the order of things.”

They ignore the reality that the Christ-centered part of our family story begins in woundedness.

The disciples all carry wounds, as they huddle together in a locked house. They’re wounded by their fear; they’re wounded by sadness, they’re wounded by the grief of what they have just been through in these last days with Jesus, and by the horror of what he endured.

Thomas, though, has a special woundedness now.

He, alone among the group, is wounded by his absence from them at the time of a profound event, which has left him isolated from his own unique and crucial community.

Just that morning, Mary Magdalene had had her strange encounter, having come to the tomb and found the stone rolled away; and she had gone and told Peter and another disciple, and they had run to the tomb and gone in and found it empty. They went back to their homes, but Mary stood there, weeping for who knows how many different reasons—sorrow, confusion, shock, joy, amazement.

That’s when she bent over to look into the tomb;

and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet.

They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said, “They’ve taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”

And then she turned around, and the gardener was standing there, and he said, “Why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?”

And she said, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”

And he said to her, “Mary!” And she recognized that it was Jesus who was speaking to her.

And after a short and mystical encounter with him, she went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them what he had said to her.

That evening, they were all in the house—all except for Thomas—when Jesus came to them.

He came into the room, despite the locked door.

He breathed on them with the breath of God, the Wind, the Spirit, the *ruah*.

They had an astonishing, life-changing experience.

And Thomas, who had gone through *everything* with them, wasn't there.

Dr. Jack Kornfield wrote a book a few years ago, based on both research and anecdotal accounts of religious leaders and spiritual practitioners from Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, and Sufi traditions, about what happens in the immediate aftermath of a profound spiritual awakening.

The book was called *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*.

Imagine Thomas's pain, not only for having missed the small group event that redefined human and divine reality, but then, as they continue with their everyday, mundane human lives. As they did laundry and made dinner and ate and slept and breathed, he had to know the whole time:

this is my community, and the hugest thing that ever happened happened, and *I wasn't there*.

They had their lives to get on with, and Thomas had to deal with that wound.

And he said, “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.”

Meanwhile, the rest of them are still carrying around wounds of their own.

The state-sponsored execution of their leader has left them in a world that he had already turned upside down, but now a world that they understand even less than before.

They're left huddled in a house, terrified of the neighbors and petrified of the authorities, and trying to figure out, what in the world do we do now?

And how can the world make any sense at all?

Good people of the Church do that a lot these days.

Sometimes the first baby steps of liberation and public acceptance—and acceptance in the church—of some who have long been treated as unacceptable,

sometimes those first baby steps of acceptance bring the pain of confusion and loss for those who thought they understood at least a little bit of how the world works.

And now, they're seeing light bulbs popping on all over the place for their neighbors, their work colleagues, their family members, even their friends at church; and they're left going, "But, wait a minute; this isn't what we were taught! This was never supposed to be right in our world! This doesn't work with the way I've read the Bible my whole life—and I'm not an idiot, and I'm not cold-hearted."

Sometimes, the world we thought we knew and understood becomes a different place; underground tectonic plates shift, and then it's hard to know where we are anymore.

So while some are praying through a new and hopeful dawn, others are finding confusion, and they bring their own wounds to church alongside the people who have been wounded by prejudice and mockery and isolation and cruelty and accusations of deviance and criminality for being who they are.

Disciples, visitors, seekers, questioners, people of faith, people of doubt: everybody's wounded. *Everybody's* wounded. Outside the church, in the marketplace, that means nobody's special. Inside the house of God, at the table of the Lord, it means every single one of us is special.

And all the disciples, with their psychic wounds, their emotional wounds, their personal wounds, their private wounds, were in the house again; and this time, Thomas was there.

And just like the week before, although the doors were shut, the risen, transcendent Christ, the Almighty God of the universe, came and stood among them and said to these wounded disciples, “Peace with you.”

And he said to wounded Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side.”

To be wounded is not to be inadequate as a servant, or distant from your Creator, or diminished in the meaning and value of your life.

You, in your woundedness, are not alone from each other, or separated from God.

Jesus came first to the disciples, then to Thomas in particular, and said:

Look right here, Thomas. If you come close enough to me, you can feel it.

I have scars, too.

I’ve been hurt pretty badly, too.

I have some wounds that haven’t healed. See. I’m wounded, too.

Frederick Buechner said,

“Even though he said the greater blessing
is for those who can believe without seeing,
it’s hard to imagine that there’s a believer anywhere
who wouldn’t have traded places with Thomas, given the chance,
and seen that face
and heard that voice
and touched those ruined hands.”ⁱⁱ

Easter has a message for the wounded.

We are assured that we are not isolated in our woundedness, but subject to the healing camaraderie of the wounded, including our sibling Jesus, our savior, the risen Christ.

Easter's message is heard when the disciples say, Thomas, *we have seen the Lord*;

And it's proclaimed again when Thomas can grab those ruined hands for himself and say:

My Lord, and my God.

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ⁱ This is an exact description of a scene from the 1994 movie *Forrest Gump*. Screenplay written by Eric Roth, based on the novel *Forrest Gump* by Winston Groom.

ⁱⁱ Frederick Buechner, Thomas, in *Peculiar Treasures*. Harper San Francisco, 1993.