

Experiencing the Wounds of Christ

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Earlier this week I was visiting with someone. Seeing that he was lost in deep thought, I asked him with all earnestness, “How do you feel?” He looked me in the eyes, and with equal sincerity he said, “With my hands.” He momentarily alluded my question but he made a good point. Feelings are born out of experience – the experience of touching, seeing, and hearing as well as being touched, being seen, and being heard. In today’s Gospel lesson Jesus offers himself to Thomas and instructs Thomas to experience him. Through this very intimate encounter with Jesus, Thomas’ faith shifts – he moves from believing in the movement which Jesus led and the vision towards which Jesus worked to believing in Jesus himself. After having experienced the wounds of the Risen Christ, Thomas proclaims Jesus to be “Lord and God.”

Every time I prepare for a sermon I expect to be surprised. I enter into the original language, in this case Greek, eager to see what will be revealed. This text, like all of scripture, contains multiple surprises. For instance, the word “doubt” (from which we get the name Doubting Thomas) isn’t in the Greek – Jesus doesn’t tell Thomas not to doubt, but rather Jesus tells Thomas to “be not an unbeliever.” Doubt is an element of faith, not a sign of unbelief. This is one nugget for you to ponder later. Two other nuggets, which we will explore later this morning, are the words “see” and “believe”.

Today’s sermon text is preceded by Mary Magdalene’s encounter with the Risen Christ. After having spoken with and touched Jesus in the morning, Mary runs to the disciples and tells them that she has seen the Lord. Later that same night Jesus appears to the disciples who are gathered together behind a locked door. All of the disciples, with the exception of Thomas, are present to witness the Resurrected Christ. Where is Thomas? Why isn’t he there? The fact that he is not with the other disciples is notable. The leader of their movement had just been executed by the government. In Jesus’ absence, the

disciples are now the new leadership of the Jesus movement. They should all be together. And, they should be behind closed doors for – for all of their lives are at risk. So, where is Thomas? Why isn't he locked behind the doors with them?

Chapter 11 provides some insight into this question. In Chapter 11 Jesus is preparing to travel to Judea to see Lazarus. The disciples warn Jesus not to go because they know his life is at risk. The religious leaders have been conspiring to arrest him and his disciples urge him to stay hidden, reminding him that last time he was out in public he was nearly stoned. Thomas, however, encourages Jesus to go and he tells his colleagues "we must go with him and we must be prepared to die with him." Just as the fear of death did not keep Thomas from traveling to Judea to see Lazarus, it did not keep Thomas behind locked doors that evening. His belief in the values and vision of the Jesus movement was greater than his fear of death. Thomas wasn't absent from the group that evening because he doubted or had given up. Thomas was absent because he was still engaged, he was still working. Mary told him that Jesus was alive and he was out looking for Jesus.

One verse and a week later Thomas is with the disciples, who are again behind locked doors. Thomas isn't here due to fear; he isn't hiding out. Thomas is here because this is the last place Jesus was seen and Thomas has been looking for Jesus. He has been told twice now that Jesus is alive and he wants to see Jesus for himself. And he does. Jesus appears to Thomas, offering his hands and his side saying "Put your finger here and your hand here and see. . ."

Time for one of those nuggets I mentioned earlier. The word for "see" means much more than to "look at or gaze upon." The Greek word for "see" (*oraw*) means to "experience mentally and spiritually" – to know something or someone fully, with one's mind and one's heart. Jesus is instructing Thomas to fully know Jesus by experiencing his wounds. Jesus doesn't show his wounds in order to validate his identity

but rather to reveal his identity. Jesus shows Thomas his wounds, and instructs Thomas to touch, to feel, to explore his wounds, so that Thomas might truly know who Jesus is.

This interaction between Jesus and Thomas is exceptionally intimate. It evokes images of nurses dressing the wounds of patients, mothers rocking feverish children, and lovers holding their emotionally imperiled partners. Jesus, in offering his wounds to Thomas, assumes the role of vulnerable patient. And in that vulnerability, Thomas sees Jesus for who he truly is. Looking into the raw wounds in Jesus' palms, Thomas sees the values which guided the Jesus movement: love, truth, peace, freedom, and justice.

In Jesus' wounds Thomas sees love for those who are disregarded, disparaged, and disposed.

In Jesus' wounds Thomas sees truth for those who manipulated, coerced, and abused.

In Jesus' wounds Thomas sees peace for those who are scapegoated, threatened, and violated.

In Jesus' wounds Thomas sees freedom for those who are shunned, shamed and silenced.

In Jesus' wounds Thomas sees justice for those who are ostracized, sick, hungry, and homeless.

In Jesus' wounds Thomas sees the pain of the world.

And in Jesus' resurrected wounds, Thomas sees the hope of the world.

Having experienced Jesus' wounds, having touched them with his hands, having felt them with his heart, and having known them with his mind, Thomas cries out "I know who you are, 'You are my Lord and my God.' It is you in whom I believe, in you I place my trust."

The third nugget I offer you comes from the word "believe." Jesus tells Thomas to "see and believe".

Now we would assume that "believe" is a verb because it is always a verb. Belief is not an idea or a concept; belief is an action, it is the way we live. But in this sentence Jesus speaks of belief as a noun – he is talking about the entity of that belief. He is talking about himself. This noun points at Jesus.

When Jesus instructs Thomas to "see and believe" he is instructing Thomas to "see me, experience me,

and know that I am the one worthy of your belief.” And Thomas gets it. After experiencing Jesus, Thomas’ faith shifts from a belief in the mission and vision of the Jesus movement to a belief in Jesus himself.

This story closes with what has often been understood to be a denunciation of Thomas. “Do you believe because you saw? Blessed are those who did not see and still believe.” I don’t think this is a criticism. Jesus is simply speaking the truth. There are some who will believe in Jesus without having experienced him. But, for most of us, along Mary Magdalene, the disciples, and Thomas, our faith is most formed by our encounters with the God. And just as Jesus appeared to Mary, the disciples, and Thomas in distinctly different ways, God meets us where we are at and appears to us in the ways that we need. Mary was grieving and she needed to be held. So, Jesus held her. The disciples were frightened. So Jesus appeared bringing peace. Thomas needed to touch Jesus wounds. So Jesus allowed him to do so. Jesus meets us where we are at in exactly the ways that we need. There is no right way or wrong way, no right place or wrong place, to encounter and experience God. If there were a right way or a wrong way, a right place or a wrong place, then that would mean that we have control over when, where and how we meet God. But, we don’t have control over God. God reveals Godself to us whenever, wherever and however God chooses and like Mary, the disciples and Thomas, we stand in awe.

I’m going to close with a story from Easter. I wasn’t here on Easter Sunday. I spent the morning in Jail. I brought communion and oils for blessings to the men. I arrived early. It was quite and somber. There was heavy weight of sadness blanketing the jail that morning. People sat or paced behind locked steel doors, locked in cages, grieving, aching for a life that once was but no longer is and deeply frightened for their futures. The men were surprised to see me. They were shocked. I don’t normally visit the jail on Sunday morning – I’m here teaching Confirmation Class. But on Easter I felt compelled to spend the morning with my extended family at the Dane County Jail. And we were grateful for each other’s company. The men shared their stories with me, they offered me their wounds, and allowed me to

explore those wounds, so that I might know them better. And when those wounds had been touched and probed enough, we prayed - we gave thanks for the one who was wounded for our sake. Then we ate and drank, we experienced and were united with his wounded and resurrected body. And then we were blessed with a promise of healing by the only one who can offer us such a promise, the one who himself was resurrected. Human touch is not allowed in jail. People will go months, sometimes years, without the touch of another. On this Easter morning, however, I reached my arm through the locked steel doors and with eucalyptus scented oil, I marked the cross of the wounded and resurrected savior each searching, grieving, and frightened man's forehead, as I said these words:

May the Lord bless you and keep you,
May the Lord's face shine upon you with grace and mercy,
May the Lord look upon you with favor,
And may the Lord bring you peace.

God shows up wherever, whenever and however God chooses, offering Godself to us so that we might experience and know, truly know who God is and through knowing the one whom we believe, we might receive hope and peace.

Amen.