

Second Sunday of Easter
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
Saint Francisville, LA
John 20:19-31

- On the side and bottom of my left elbow, there are two thick lines of scar tissue - from when I broke my arm pretty badly in high school and had to have surgery to screw my bones back together and another surgery several years later to fix some nerve damage in there.
- At the top of my wrist, I've got a little scar from when I kid and slipped while whittling a piece wood a little too energetically.
- My knees are all marked up from the days I thought it was a good idea to nail roller skate wheels to a piece of plywood and ride it like a sled down the road - while holding on to a rope that my brother was towing behind his bicycle.
- Behind every scar there is a story - and over the years, your body becomes a kind of historical record in which certain dramatic moments are memorialized through marks in the flesh.
- In many ways, scars are identity markers - displaying something of our unique life history, and revealing something about who we are.
- To share your scars (and their stories) with someone is an intimate experience - you have to expose yourself, to open up, and be vulnerable before them - not cover up or hide - like we may naturally want to do - but to reveal yourself, your life, and let them in.
- In our gospel reading for today, the disciples are hiding - covering themselves behind locked doors - they are hiding because they're afraid of the religious leaders of Israel - they're afraid because the memory of what just happened to Jesus is still fresh in their minds.
- The disciples saw how the authorities came for Jesus in the evening, put him on trial, brought false witnesses against him, beat him, degraded him - and handed him over to the Romans to be killed.
- And it was such a brutal execution - death by crucifixion,
- They saw, or have heard, about how he was tortured and mocked - how he was not just tied, but nailed to the cross - his side pierced to confirm his death.
- They're hiding because they are afraid. And that's understandable.
- If they were seen together, gathered in a group - someone might recognize them as Christ's disciples - maybe assume the movement Jesus began didn't end with Jesus' death - that his disciples are still gathering together and will continue sharing Jesus' disruptive teachings . Wouldn't the religious leaders come for them next - maybe do to them what they did to Jesus?

- This appears to be what's happening in the story we heard today from Acts - the apostles are arrested by the temple police - brought before the council and high priest - who says to them, "we gave you strict orders not to teach in this name (the name of Jesus), yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching"
- But before we get to that point - before the disciples are sent out (as apostles) - before they become witnesses to the resurrection - the disciples stay hidden
- They don't think they could endure such an ordeal.
- They're afraid of suffering - (naturally) - they want to avoid it - they want to be protected from pain - to be safe.
- I say "naturally" - because we do the same, do we not? We want to avoid suffering - to be protected from pain - to be safe.
- And - there is nothing inherently wrong with that.
- The disciples - and us - don't want to go through what Jesus went through.
 - Jesus didn't want to do it either - he rather would have avoided the suffering - the passion. He spent the whole night before his death praying in Gethsemane that it wouldn't happen - "let this cup pass from my lips." That was his will, that's what he wanted - not to suffer.
- So, the disciples have shut and locked the doors - and they're not letting anyone in - they're trying to protect themselves - not wanting to get hurt.
- And then Jesus shows up. "Jesus came and stood among them"
- He says - "Peace be with you" -
- Then, we're told - "he showed them his hands and his side"
- Why?
- Not only - Why does he show them his wounds? But - Why does he still have wounds to show?
- He is risen - never to die again - why aren't his wounds removed, his scars erased? Why does the resurrected body still bear the marks of the crucifixion?
- Maybe it's for identification - so that he might be recognized as Christ - the same Jesus who was crucified, died, and was buried. As if he's saying -
- Yes, it's me. Yes, they nailed me to the cross. Yes, they pierced my side.
- I died. I was dead. And now I live.
- I'm here. "Peace be with you."
- Christ shows his wounds - the evidence of his passion - and he shows what God has done with them - how he has made them instruments of peace.
- "Peace" here means not personal inner tranquility - being untroubled - undisturbed - totally calm and secure.
- "Peace" - has to do with relationships - with reconciliation - the Greek word refers to wholeness - being made whole - a joining together of something separated.

- “Peace” in this sense means tearing down dividing walls - not letting barriers (like locked doors) prevent one from entering into fellowship with others.
- To have peace - is to not have enemies.
- We may have been opponents, but to have peace means we are no longer at odds. There are no longer any barriers to relation - we can come together - can have fellowship with one another - can live in unity.
- We were once separated from the Father - we opposed him in our lives - made ourselves enemies of his Son Jesus Christ -
- But God took the initiative to deliver us when we were trapped behind barriers of sin and fear - he sent his Son - who came to us - to give us peace - reconciliation and the restoration of fellowship - the forgiveness of sins.
- Sin gets in the way of relationship - with God - with one another - if I have wronged you - hurt you - sinned against you - that will hinder our relationship - our ability to fellowship with one another - to be in communion.
- Forgiveness acknowledges the harm done - and says - this will no longer be a barrier to our future relationship - will not prevent us from having fellowship with one another.
- Christ gives us that power - the power to forgive - when he gives the holy spirit - if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any they are retained.”
- Forgiveness does not mean the past is erased - removed without a trace - forgiveness changes what the past means for us.
- The resurrected body still bears the marks of our sins - but the wounds are changed - transformed into something else - something beautiful - signs of glory - signs of Christ’s redeeming love.
 - Early 17th century painting by the Italian Baroque master, Caravaggio. The Incredulity of Saint Thomas.
 - Depicts a gruesome visceral image, in which Jesus is holding Thomas’ hand and guiding it into the open wound in his side.
 - On Thomas’ face is an expression of both awe and anguish
 - Unable to look directly at what he is doing, but staring off into the distance
 - Looks like he is about to fall over
 - Two other disciples are at his side, holding him up
 - Thomas gets a bad rap – has reputation for “doubting”
 - That he doubted the report of the others, his fellow disciples, who had seen the risen Christ?
 - That he did not believe the words of the Lord, who had previously informed the disciples of what was to come – that he would be handed over to suffering and death and then raised on the third day?
- Perhaps

- But I think – the anguish of Thomas
- Evoked by - The recognition that he is responsible for the wound in Christ sides
- Christ suffered and died for our sins, the sins of humanity – Thomas’ sins – our sins
- Anguish that comes from the recognition that - We are the one’s responsible for his wounds
 - I believe that is what Thomas “saw” when he touched the wound in Christ’s side
 - It is as if Christ were simultaneously saying to him – “I forgive you” “You did this to me” “These are the wounds I have suffered on your behalf” “I forgive you”
 - In the face of Thomas, then, which is so clearly seen in the expression depicted by Caravaggio is the look of recognition, the simultaneous recognition of the wounds inflicted by the sins of the past, and the present recognition of God’s abundant mercy and grace.
 - During the Good Friday liturgy - we sang a hymn - “Ah, Lord Jesus” - and I was really struck by the words:

Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee?

Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee.

'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee:

I crucified thee.

- I realized - it is true - I crucified thee.
- The marks in Christ’s flesh are signs that say, yes this happened -- the scars of the past become testaments to God’s power - signs that nothing can separate us from God’s love - not your sin, not your doubt, not even death -
- Yes, you nailed me to the cross. Yes, you pierced my side.
- I died. I was dead. And now I live.
- I’m here. “Peace be with you.”
- Be made whole - be reconciled - live in unity - be a community of love - as I have loved you, love one another.
- To love as Christ loved - to be sent into the world as the Father sent him - is no easy task - we will suffer - we will be rejected - we’ll hurt .
- And yet, the promise we have in our gospel is that God will take our suffering and turn it into glory - God will change our wounds into beauty - God will make our scars into testaments of his power and love.
- May we show forth in our lives what we profess by faith. And the peace of the Lord be always with you. Amen.

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