

Sermon for the Congregations of the East Central Synod of Wisconsin
Sunday of Easter, Year C – April 24, 2022

John 20:19-31

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Grace, peace, and mercy are yours in the Triune God. Amen.

I've never trusted people without wounds. Obviously we're humans—we all have wounds. But there's a difference between the people willing to reveal their wounds and the ones that aren't. I don't know how to trust people who don't know their own wounds and aren't willing to reveal them.

In fact, I think that's part of what kept me away from organized religion for several years during my early 20s. I had belonged to a number of different kinds of churches before then. But it never quite felt like I belonged. The churches I had experienced were full of bright and shiny people. You know, everyone there kind of looked alike. Everyone was all wholesome. Everyone was a part of the same socioeconomic group. It seemed to me that part of what it meant to be a Christian was to have a relentlessly positive, can-do attitude, and an unwavering faith.

Meanwhile, I was going through a time in my own life when things were not bright and shiny. I was struggling with depression and try as I did, prayer and devotion and positive thinking and "giving it all to God" simply was not bringing me the healing that I needed. It became far too exhausting for me to keep up the façade that everything was fine anymore.

And so I developed 2 basic responses to church: Anger and Shame. I got angry about everywhere I saw the church being hypocritical or fake. I was angry about the church turning its back on the suffering in the world. And yet, at the same time, I felt shame too. It seemed that if only I tried harder or believed more strongly, then I would be like all the other bright and shiny Christians. It felt like church was a self-improvement group but that everyone else was further along than me. Eventually I was too frustrated and demoralized to keep trying, so I gave up on church. Maybe faith was a thing that worked for other people, but never would for me.

When I look back on that time in my life today, I realize that it wasn't just church that I felt this way about. It was also God. I felt anger towards God, and shame before God. Anger that God wouldn't just fix me and all the rest of the suffering in the world.

And yet, somehow, at the same time, I felt shame before God. Like there was something wrong with me, that this was my fault.

Anger and shame. I wonder if Thomas was experiencing a mix of these emotions when we meet him today. He and the disciples have just lived through a major trauma. First, Jesus had interrupted each of their lives. They left everything to follow him. And then, after having just spent the past 3 years traveling around with their teacher he began to call them friends.

They had spent 3 years, staying in many and various other people's homes, forming relationships and community together, learning from Jesus, and building a movement they hoped would change the world. Until, suddenly, it all fell apart. In his hour of greatest need, they abandoned him. Jesus, their teacher and friend

was violently killed. Their hopes and dreams were buried with Jesus, in a stranger's tomb, behind a giant immovable stone.

So when all of Thomas' friends come running to tell him that Christ has risen again from the dead, he is astonished. Maybe he thought his friends were pulling some kind of sick joke. How dare they talk like that – like the events of the last couple days had never even happened? And what if Jesus had actually risen from the dead? Why would he have left Thomas out? Perhaps Thomas was feeling some combination of anger and shame.

Trauma and grief, when they strike, are not feelings that can be managed. They are a full body experience that manages you. And so it shouldn't be too surprising to us that Thomas responds this way. He's not alone. During the past two years of COVID, we have all experienced trauma and grief, each in our own way. Many have lost loved ones. All of us have lost the world as we knew it before, that "normal" that we long to get back to. And according to psychologists, one of the things that people often lose during times of trauma or grief, is a sense of self. A sense that you understand yourself, that you are safely predictable.

Whatever it was that Thomas was feeling, it leads him to say something oddly specific. He doesn't ask for just any proof that Christ has risen. He doesn't say that he'll believe once he SEES Jesus alive and well. He says that he will not believe unless he can touch and see the wounds.

So Jesus could've actually risen from the dead and appeared behind locked doors, the whole nine yards, but without the wounds, Thomas wouldn't have believed. I love Thomas. Because to be honest, without the wounds, I don't think I could believe either. I need this wounded God.

If I'm going to have wounds that haven't healed yet, I NEED a God with wounds that haven't healed yet either. How could Jesus' wounds be healed if we, the church, his body, are still torn apart? I need a Savior whose resurrection incorporates the suffering of this world. I need a Christ whose risen life does not erase suffering but transforms it.

Because let's be honest, that's just how suffering works. Trauma and grief are not the types of wounds that we can just get over. We can grow as we live with them. Our relationship with the wounds can change over time. We can find ourselves experiencing joy and fullness of life once again. But the wounds that have deeply marked our lives, will never completely go away.

We can regain our sense of self. But after something like grief or trauma, we'll never be the same person as before. Risen life will never be the same as it was before Good Friday. We're different people than we were before. We are a different church today than we were before COVID. And there can be no going back.

I needed a church that was willing to show me the risen and wounded Christ. And

eventually, I encountered one. And then another and another. And it's changed everything for me.

I have to admit, I wouldn't have guessed that the risen Christ would still be wounded. If he was going to rise from the dead, I would've guessed he'd be looking all bright and shiny. I would've thought he'd come back looking less like a gardener and more like one of those angels in dazzling white robes. But I thank God that he does have the wounds to remind us that he was with us our worst moments, and that the resurrection gift of new life is not for bright and shiny people, but wounded ones.

Jesus shows us that perhaps the resurrection does mean a new life full of meaning. But it isn't all sunshine and butterflies. It's not pretty. But it is beautiful. It's not bright and shiny. But it is real.

Wounds might not sound like good news to you. Especially if you haven't felt your own in a while. And it wouldn't be good news if they were wounds on a dead body. The thing that does make it good news is that these wounds aren't holding Jesus down any longer. They are there. Full and complete healing still hasn't come.

Yet already, you can see that these wounds have lost their power over his life. They can't hold him down in the grave. They can't keep him from breaking out of Hell.

This is the type of new life that Thomas gains when he encounters Jesus' wounds. He could no longer be held back by his own—the anger and shame and fears of what wounds may come.

Like Thomas, we are invited into community, into the Body of Christ, the church—to the vulnerability of sharing our wounds rather than hiding them. If in Jesus, we have a God gutsy enough to offer us his wounds to touch, then maybe like Jesus we're supposed to offer our wounds to one another. Maybe the thing that makes us Christian is not how much faith we have, or how good we are, maybe it's simply how real we are willing to be. And how God, somehow always, shows up in our lives, not as they should be, but as they are.

Blessed are you who ask questions, for you yourselves shall become living answers. Blessed are the doubters for you shall see God's faithfulness. Blessed are the seekers for you yourselves shall be found. Blessed are the fearful for God will bust through your locked doors. Blessed are the cynical for your hearts will turn soft again. Blessed are the wounded for you shall touch and feel the wounds of Christ. And blessed are we of little faith, God has come for us. Alleluia. Amen.
