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“Scars”

A sermon by Mindy Douglas

Second Sunday of Easter (Year A)

April 23, 2017

John 20:19-31

*[Special thanks to my friend, colleague, and former Camp Buc camper **Christy Owen Brown**, who preached a sermon on this topic back in 2010 at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Durham. Many of the ideas in this sermon are drawn from her sermon that day.]¹*

Youth directors are always looking for great conversation starters and game ideas to use with youth groups. Ice-breakers, as they are called, give youth fun and interesting ways to connect with one another. One such game involves telling others your scar stories. Everybody has at least one scar by the time they get to high school, and each scar comes with its own story. My own scar stories track my years growing up—the chin scar from a fall in the bathtub at age four, the right hand scar from my attempt to escape a boy who wanted to kiss me in second grade, the left hand scar from trying to open a package with a cake knife in fifth grade, and the scars on my face from a car accident in college. My scars tell stories of my life.

I am sure you have scar stories of your own. We all have scars of some sort. As my friend Christi Owen Brown knows,

¹ <http://www.faithandleadership.com/sermons/scars-hope> (on 4-8-15)

There truly is a story behind every scar. Some of the stories are painful; others are funny. Some are significant, while others, less so. Some are filled with shame, while others are full of pride. Yet without exception, every scar serves as a visible reminder of wounds we've incurred.²

In our text for today, we find a two thousand-year-old scar story. It begins on Easter evening, with the disciples gathered behind locked doors in fear. Jesus, resurrected and covered in scars, appears among them somehow and offers words of peace—"Peace be with you." He then shows them his hands and side and the disciples rejoice. Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit on them and gives them the greatest power of love—the power to forgive.

But one of the disciples, Thomas, was not there to see Jesus and hear his scar story on that Easter day.

When the other disciples told Thomas that they had seen the risen Lord, he did not believe them. "I'll believe it when I see it," he said. "I'll believe it when I touch his scars, and not a moment sooner."

"Doubting Thomas," he's been called for years and years. The one who had to see to believe. The one who doubted Jesus had risen. Poor guy. He really gets a bad rap.

But I have to believe that Thomas wasn't as much a doubter as he was a realist. He had always been the one to look at the world practically, pragmatically, realistically. Remember back in the fourteenth chapter of John's gospel when Jesus tells the disciples that he is going to prepare a place for them and that they know the way to the place where he is going? Well, it's Thomas who speaks up in that situation—"Excuse me, Lord, but we don't know where you are going. How are we supposed to know the way?" (14:5). Thomas is thinking, "If we are going to be able to follow you, then we will need an address, a destination point, or, at the very least, some directions." He also thinks realistically when Jesus tells them he is going to Jerusalem. Thomas knows that going to Jerusalem will lead to Jesus'

² <http://www.faithandleadership.com/sermons/scars-hope> (on 4-8-15)

death. He is realistic about what that means and he courageously invites the others to follow Jesus. “Let us go also, that we may die with him” (11:16).³

Thomas, writes David Lose, “was, above all else, a realist.”⁴

He had been hardened and tempered by his experience in the world . . . And for Thomas reality had come as never before just days earlier in the form of a cross, when his master and friend had been crucified; when he had fled and deserted Jesus; when he realized that the hopes and expectations of the last three years were as dead as his beloved Lord.⁵

There was no more room for optimism or idealism or even hope that Jesus was going to lead them to any kind of victory or significant change. He had seen it with his own eyes. It was as real as the ground he walked on. Jesus was dead.

Thomas, the realist, knew that it was time to move on. No sense wasting time hoping that it had been a dream. It was what it was. And now it was over. Time to get on with life.

It’s no wonder he wasn’t ready to embrace the news the other disciples shared with him. It was too good to be true. I mean, really. A man raised from the dead? I know, I know, the disciples knew the stories of Lazarus and Jairus’ daughter and probably even more stories of people coming back from the dead, but that was when Jesus was around and he wasn’t around anymore. He was gone and wishful thinking wouldn’t make it otherwise. If the other disciples had seen something, it wasn’t Jesus. That was too good to be true . . . and Thomas knew it. So he embraced reality and went about his life.

Jesus appeared to the disciples a second time when they gathered a week after his resurrection, still in the same house, still behind closed doors. Jesus came, again with words of peace, “Peace be with you.” He invited Thomas to see his scars, to touch his wounds. But Thomas, now that Jesus before him, doesn’t need to do that

³ http://day1.org/1082-realities_old_and_new (on 4-9-15)

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid.

anymore. He recognizes Christ's presence with him. He knows that the embodied, resurrected Jesus stands before him and that everything has changed. Jesus' scars tell the story, but the life breath within him, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, is the real evidence. Love is embodied right there in front of Thomas, and he knows it when he sees it. Love present in living, breathing scars.

The presence of these scars, however, begs the question: "Why did God not raise Jesus in a perfected body? Wouldn't the resurrected body be perfectly healed, without blemish or scar? Brown, I believe, captures the power of the presence of Jesus' scars when she writes:

Jesus, our Lord and our God in the glory of the resurrection, still bears the wounds of his experience of God with us on earth. The resurrection did not remove his human experience. The risen Lord still bears on his body the scars that speak of his solidarity with human suffering in all of its forms. These scars serve as a reminder that God is with us through all things, especially the appalling, destructive and death-dealing times.

The image of the risen Christ with wounds in his hands and his side reminds us when we suffer that so did our God; when we cry out in loneliness, so did our God. When we feel abandoned and alone, we remember that Christ hung on a cross and yelled for us, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" We don't have a God who stands at a distance but rather one who entered fully into the reality of our pain. So when we suffer, we know that Christ can say, "I've been there, and I have the wounds to prove it."

Christ's scars become part of our story, and our scars become a part of God's story in our lives. The scars of Christ become scars of hope as we deal with our own wounds in life. It seems there are some scars we love to show off, and there are others we want sewed up as neat as possible so that no one ever knows. Yet scars, whether visible to the eye or not, are something we all have in common -- something everyone shares. We all have experienced

pain, both physically and emotionally, in our lives. Yet we are so often reluctant to share them with one another.⁶

Not too long ago, I had the privilege of hearing a father and son tell their powerful scar stories to a fellowship hall full of church leaders from Chapel Hill and Durham. The father, Alan Johnson, is a retired UCC minister from Colorado who co-founded the Interfaith Network on Mental Illness (INMI). His son, Knowl Johnson, is a former actor and personal trainer from New York City. Knowl also suffers from bi-polar disorder. Both men carry scars, many and deep, though not the visible type. Their scars are the kind that can't be seen, the kind that come from intense suffering, fear, isolation, loneliness, betrayal, confusion and loss. They shared their scar stories with us as opening and honestly as I have heard a father and son share. Around the room, we listened, reflecting on our own hidden scars. We all knew something about mental illness, either through our own personal experiences or through the experiences of people we love. We all knew about such invisible scars.

At some point in the evening, Alan, who works directly with faith communities, challenged us as faith leaders—clergy and lay—to break the silence of mental illness and to help create safe spaces for people to be who they are, scars and all. As a church, we should be a place where people feel safe enough to share their scar stories with one another, to be bound together in our common brokenness and need for Christ and to find Christ present among us with his own saving, forgiving, grace-filled scars.

You know, some people say they have stopped coming to church because they don't find it to be "authentic." Authentic is the latest fad word for that which is true-to-life, that which is real. Some have left the church because they believe that the church pretends to be something it isn't, dressing up its scars and covering up its wounds and not dealing with real issues and challenges of life. They believe they won't be welcomed with their own scars and their own scar stories.

⁶ <http://www.faithandleadership.com/sermons/scars-hope> (on 4-10-15)

I dare say they are wrong. We, the people of God, are called to be the Body of Christ, broken and healed by God’s grace and love. We are a scarred and broken people with a scarred and broken Savior who has died and been raised for us all. In Christ our wounds are healed, our sins are forgiven, and we are given a second chance at new life—even new life with old scars. Our scars are a part of our story, just as Jesus’ scars were a part of his story. Without them, we would be less than real, less than “authentic.” Without them, Jesus would be less than the one who had suffered, died and conquered death for us. With them, Jesus stands with us as one who has been scarred by suffering and death, yet is alive among us. Who better to lift the burden of our scars than this Jesus, our life, our hope, our Lord?

Thomas said to Jesus, “Let me see your scars. That is how I know you are real.”

He is real. He is Risen! He is Risen indeed!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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