

SCARS

By
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from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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1 John 1:1-2:2

¹We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— ²this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— ³we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. ⁴We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

⁵This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. ⁶If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; ⁷but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

⁸If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰If we say that we

have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

²My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; ²and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

John 20:19-31

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. ³¹But 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.

By definition, a tagline is a short phrase that clearly communicates the brand message of an organization. What do you think might have been a fitting tagline for the group of people who had been followers of Jesus as they gathered on the evening of that first Easter? They had heard, but not fully received, resurrection news. How might we characterize First Church, Jerusalem as that first Easter day drew to a close? Seminary professor Tom Long tests out a couple of taglines: ‘The friendly church where all are welcome.’ That wouldn’t work. The locked doors behind which they gathered were certainly not an indication of a hospitable spirit. How about this one? ‘The church with a warm heart and a bold mission.’ Forget it. This is the church of sweaty palms and shaky knees.¹ Their world was more shaken than was ours on Friday, with a figurative 8.0 on the Richter scale. The group in the room resembled a tomb more than a faith community.

Our reading from the Gospel of John often leads to a focus on one particular disciple named Thomas who expresses his doubts, when in reality, all of the followers had difficulty fully believing the resurrection news that had come to them. Wouldn’t it have been interesting to listen in on their conversation that first Easter evening before Jesus showed up? Mary Magdalene had told them the amazing news that she had seen the risen Lord earlier that morning. Others had gone to the tomb and had confirmed that it was empty except for the linen wrappings which had covered Jesus’ body. Those who had followed Jesus must have gone over Mary’s story repeatedly, with at least some of them wondering whether she might have suffered a mental breakdown. Certainly, they had asked Mary how he had looked. She must have told them that she didn’t recognize him at first, but she would admit that she had been crying at the time. As someone who had been a close follower, could Mary have mistaken someone else for Jesus? If it was someone other than Jesus whom she had seen, then where had their Lord’s body been taken and why were the grave cloths still there? Their heads and their hearts must have been reeling.

¹ Thomas G. Long, Whispering the Lyrics, CSS Publishing, 1995

On Thursday night, the disciples had scattered after Jesus' arrest. Now they were back in one place. Would Peter have admitted to the others about his triple denial of knowing Jesus? Would the others have expressed regret about not standing with their Lord when the blur of events moved toward his execution? None of the gospel accounts give us details about such conversations at this critical time.

What the Gospel of John does tell us is that on that Easter Sunday evening, they were together in a house with the doors locked, because they were feeling vulnerable and scared. What they had been through was incredibly unsettling. Yet somehow, suddenly, Jesus was standing in their midst. He, of course, could have chided them for abandoning him when he had been on trial and when he was being crucified. He could have cross-examined them as to whether they had believed Mary Magdalene when she shared of her experience of the resurrection. But he knew what they very much needed to hear, and he knew what he wanted to convey to them. "Peace be with you," he says to them. During their last meal together, he had told them, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." This peace Christ offered was not an escape from stress or an exemption from suffering. No, for even as he says, "Peace be with you," he is showing them the wounds in his hands and side. What he is doing is equipping them to believe that whatever the world inflicts upon followers wouldn't have the last word about them. He would not abandon them in their shortcomings. Rather, he enables them to become witnesses of and for the resurrection.

Thomas, who I mentioned earlier, wasn't there that night. Perhaps he was less frightened than had been the others, and felt less need to be behind locked doors. On their way to Jerusalem, he had expressed his willingness to die with Jesus. After that amazing Sunday evening encounter, the other disciples told Thomas the same thing that Mary Magdalene had told them – they had seen the Lord. They must have also told him every detail about their time with Jesus that evening, including that they had seen his wounded hands and side. Thomas told

them that he not only wanted to see Jesus, but to also touch him at the place of his woundedness.

By God's grace, he had opportunity for his own resurrection encounter a week later when all the disciples were together. Take note that when Jesus shows up once again, he doesn't criticize Thomas for spelling out what he needed to be able to believe. Instead, Jesus says to Thomas what he had said on the previous occasion to the others, "Peace be with you." And then our Lord offers Thomas what he had requested – the opportunity to touch the wounds in his hands and side.

Doubt is not a four-letter word. Many of our great advances have come about because someone doubted previously held assumptions. Look at Jesus –he had been raised with the understanding that an eye for an eye was an appropriate way to respond to violence, but he doubted that the world would be better off with two people who were visually-impaired instead of one, so he explored how loving one's enemies is actually more in keeping with God's will. Jesus was raised in a culture that said women do not have rights, Samaritans are an inferior race, and sick people probably brought their own illness upon themselves through sinfulness. Jesus doubted that such established 'truths' made sense in light of God's peace and love. Our encounters with doubt can possibly lead to a deeper, more profound faith.

We tend to tsk, tsk Thomas for expressing his need to see and touch the Lord again. But he had suffered great loss. No one is unscarred by living. All of Jesus' followers must have felt deep bereavement when Jesus was crucified. They couldn't have felt very uplifted either about their own lack of loyalty and courage when things had gotten tough. They were wounded; they were scared and scarred. Yet, Jesus, this One who embodied God's grace, comes among them freely showing his own scars, while telling them: "Peace be with you." He was saying to them and even to us, "My peace be with all who grieve; my peace be with all who are afraid; my peace be with those who need forgiveness; my peace be with those who have their doubts about whether God's presence is

something that makes a real difference.” When Thomas was offered the opportunity to touch Jesus at his place of woundedness, it is not clear from the text whether he actually did so. But it seems clear that Jesus’ loving, peace-giving, lively presence touched Thomas in his woundedness. He was then able to respond with one of the strongest affirmations of faith found in all of the scriptures when he says to Jesus, “My Lord and my God!”

Concealing one’s vulnerabilities and wounds seems to be a practice much in vogue, particularly in the church. Yet, it is quite in contrast to the practice of our Risen Lord, who by God’s power overcame death, but still had scars from his crucifixion which he openly showed. Why didn’t God fix him up? Why did our risen Lord still have the scars of nails in his hands and the gash from a spear in his side? We might say it was indication that the person they were seeing was the same Jesus who had died on the cross. He wasn’t just a ghost. But isn’t there also a message in this gospel story that the risen Christ is forever the wounded Christ? People with hearing-impairment who use sign language know that the sign for Jesus is quickly placing the middle finger of each hand into the palm of the other.² The word, the name, ‘Jesus’ is identified as the one with wounded hands. When those who know sign language touch their hands, they ‘hear’ the name in their own flesh. And they know that this Jesus does not wait until they’re all fixed up to meet them and bring them the gift of peace he offers.

That First Church of Jerusalem faced some challenges that we don’t face. Our church faces some challenges they didn’t face. But by God’s grace, the Risen Lord also comes into our midst. All of us have some emotional, if not some physical scars. I’ll leave the choice of a fitting tagline for Bryn Mawr Church to someone else. But picture a church where it is o.k. to share the scars of vulnerabilities and guilt, fears and doubts, because they will be met with a reflection of the peace offered by the Lord of the church. Picture a church whose worship reflects resurrection joy every time it gathers. Picture a church that boldly joins

² www.lifeprint.com/asl101/pages-signs/j/jesus.htm

in our Lord's ministry to others who also have scars. That is a church responding to the presence of its Risen Lord. That is a church that has experienced resurrection itself. Think about your wounds. Now, with your middle fingers, touch the palms of your hands. Hear the name in your flesh. The word is Jesus.

AMEN.