

COVENANT WORD

Visible Wounds

Psalm 130; I John 1:5-2:2; John 20:19-31

A message by
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Pastor
Sunday | April 8, 2018

Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting
to read and study these
thoughts more
carefully. Please know
that I do not take full
credit for anything that
may be contained within,
because I may have read
or heard something at
some point during my
pilgrimage and do not
remember its source and
thus, cannot give the
rightful author his/her
credit. I pray that you
will find inspiration and
encouragement.
Sarah Shelton



WHERE FAITH COMES TO LIFE

The priest climbs the stairs leading to the pulpit as a hush falls over the congregation. He calls them to prayer and the recitation of The Apostles' Creed. The deep thud of the kneeling benches fills the sacred space. The congregation rustles off the pews and settles on their knees. Then it begins:

I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth: And in Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary: suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead and buried: He descended into hell...

My head pops up. Did I hear correctly? I stop right there with "He descended into hell." I don't even get to the parts about the resurrection or the ascension or the communion of saints. I am stuck on "He descended into hell." Where is that in the gospels?

Often called "the harrowing of hell," it is a reference to the hopelessness Christ felt on the cross and what Christ did between his death and resurrection. 2000 years of Christian tradition maintains that on Silent Saturday Jesus descends into hell to break down the doors and unbind the prisoners in order to lead them to heaven. It is based on I Peter 3:19-20:

After being made alive, he (Jesus) went and made proclamation to the imprisoned saints...

There is a lot of debate in Christendom about this phrase and about the utter hopelessness Jesus expresses from the cross on Good Friday. It is almost as if churches everywhere are saying they will not deal with these dark moments. Instead, they go straight to the

celebration of Easter with egg hunts and bunnies and lilies. This shift has moved some congregations to ignore the verses of the passion and remove the phrase about hell in the Apostle's creed. (The following quotes are from Heather Hahn's article, "Did Jesus descend into hell or to the dead?" umc.org/news-and-media/did-jesus-descend-into-hell-or-to-the-dead)

Philip Clayton, theology professor at Claremont School of Theology, says: "When I recite [The Apostles' Creed] in church, I think there is just no place where the encompassing love of God cannot be present. There is no place where God is afraid to go."

Warren Smith of Duke Divinity School says: "It means there is no part of human existence to which Christ did not

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'descend!' It's what it means for Christ to take upon himself...the punishment of sin, which is death."

Barbara Brown Taylor says: "The good news of God in Christ is that when the bottom has fallen out from under you – when you have crashed through all your safety nets and you can hear the bottom rushing up to meet you – the good news is that you cannot fall farther than God can catch you." ("In Weakness and Much Trembling," *God in Pain*, p. 133)

Why does this non-creedal Baptist care about this conversation in the larger church? I care because there have been

times I thought I was in hell and I longed to know, to be assured, that God was there too. It is the prayer of the psalmist that the choir just sang for us: "Out of the depths, I have called unto you, 'Lord, hear my voice!'" I imagine this very prayer has been on your lips as well:

in the courtroom
at the hospital
with a pregnancy test
with a diagnosis
at a silent dinner table
when creditors crawl up your legs
when you are "let go"

"Out of the depths, I have called unto you, 'Lord, hear my voice!'"

I wonder if Thomas finds himself in hell, calling from the depths full of hopelessness, on the evening of the resurrection news.

We often forget how tightly woven the resurrection stories are. They occur over just a few days really. But the lectionary divides the resurrection stories into bite-size pieces for our consumption on successive Sundays during the season of Easter. So it is easy to feel that Jesus' post-resurrection appearances take weeks, because we are hearing them over several Sundays that lead to Pentecost. Take today's story for an example. It is only recorded in John's gospel and rather than occurring on the next Sabbath as we are hearing it, it takes place the very night of the same day that those hysterical women return from the tomb with the news that Jesus is not there. He is risen.

Now, I do not know about you, but this news would only add to my fear. This is not ordinary news. I attended two funerals this week and the deceased were present in one way or another. How many funerals have you attended where the deceased

He is stumbling around in the personal darkness of hopelessness.

skipped out on all the formalities? And if Jesus is not in the tomb, then where is he? No wonder the disciples are hiding behind locked doors. If the Romans' retribution doesn't get them, then Jesus is surely coming to settle accounts for their betrayals

and flight at the times that mattered most.

Thomas has been with the disciples since the beginning. His name appears in all the listings. (MT. 10:2-4; Mk 3:16-19; L 6:13-16; Acts 1:13) While he is not front and center like Simon Peter, he is mentioned on 4 occasions in John's gospel. (Mercer's Dictionary of the Bible) Let's touch on three. In chapter 11 when Jesus

learns that Lazarus has died, Jesus calls the disciples together in order to go to Bethany. This trip requires walking through Judea where there is a contract out on Jesus' life. When Thomas hears the plan, I imagine him ringing his hands filled with anxiety as he says, "Let us also go, that we may die with Jesus."

In chapter 14, Jesus speaks of going to the Father in order to prepare a way for his followers. Thomas, running his hands through his hair in frustration, asks: "How can we know the way when we don't even know where you are going?"

The third opportunity to get a glimpse of Thomas is in today's gospel reading, chapter 20. Thomas is not with the other disciples, who are hiding in a room behind locked doors. Jesus appears, displays his wounds and breathes the Holy Spirit into them.

Where is Thomas, we wonder? For years, scholars have guessed about his absence. May I join my theory to theirs? You see, I believe Thomas' previous appearances point us to a wounded person; one who is wrought with anxiety and to keep himself anchored, he requires detailed specifics for living. Ambiguity is not his forte.

So in those hours after the crucifixion, Thomas is floundering. He is not just grieving, he is lost. He is stumbling around in the personal darkness of hopelessness. The world, as he had come to know it, has broken free from its moorings. He cannot deny the world of wounds to which his eyes have been opened. The speed of Jesus' destruction overwhelms him with the immense change that has occurred in his life in only 24 hours. It starts with the trial and spirals so out of control that Thomas leaves Jesus... leaves him to hang on that cross. To think that the rest of his life will have to be lived on "high alert," has Thomas leave the 12 behind to search for what might

be next. His emotional state is such that he cannot be of any help to the others as they flounder in their own wreckage. He cannot pull himself, much less them, to safety even if he tries. Thomas is in hell. "Out of the depths, I call to you. Lord! Hear my voice!" (Fred Bahnson, "The Ecology of Prayer," *Orion Magazine*, <https://orionmagazine.org/article/the-ecology-of-prayer/>)

Fred Bahnson, professor at Wake forest, writes about visiting the Outer Banks with his sons. They wade in a tidal inlet of Pamlico Sound in shin-deep water, calling to one another over their discoveries. The day produces periodic gifts: two hermit crabs, a half-submerged diamondback terrapin and now, a new creature the size of a dinner plate. They think it is a horseshoe crab, but with a closer look, they can tell something is not quite right. The long spiny tail is missing for one, and instead of burrowing into the sand or swimming forward, the crab shuffles in place, performing a disjointed hippity hop. Turning over the carapace, they find a live and livid blue crab, snapping his pincers. The crab picked clean the flesh of the shell's original inhabitant and now the blue crab, upon being exposed, is ready to pinch the living day lights out of Bahnson and his family in revenge for disturbing his protection.

It is what we might do in our pain or grief or anxiety. We would love to find a hard shell to borrow and hide in with our fear. And if you were to discover me hiding there and suddenly expose me, I'm likely to come after you, snipping my pincers! I think Thomas is looking for an outer shell to wear as his armor against the world and when the disciples expose his need for the assurance reserved only for Jesus, Thomas comes out with pincers ready: "I will not believe unless I see his wounds myself!" Note that Thomas doesn't want to see Jesus' face. He wants to know the Christ of the resurrection by his wounds. Thomas presents as a doubter, but I think he just cannot believe that God would possibly join him in his pain. And so Jesus, eight days later, Jesus comes back just for Thomas. He comes back to show Thomas his wounds – NOT his scars. Scars connote healing, and what Jesus does is to show Thomas his wounds: oozing, swollen, bruised, raw, rusty.

Was it an oversight on God's part to resurrect Jesus from the dead but not heal Jesus of his wounds? The power of death is conquered, but the wounds remain! (Richard Hays, "Fingering the Evidence," *Christian Century*)

These wounds are eternally open so that Christ is marked by his earthly sufferings forever. Why do you think Jesus shows his wounds? I think he shows his wounds in order to lean into whatever is so wounded and broken in Thomas.

Do you know this expression "lean into the pain?" Fleming Rutledge used it as the basis of her sermon last week at Cathedral Church of the Advent. She says, "I once attended a workshop on how to be helpful to suicidal people. I will never forget what the leader said. He said, "Steer toward the pain." Most of us think we are supposed to do exactly the opposite. But he said, "If you want to help, then steer toward the pain." (In addition to Cathedral Church of the Advent, Rutledge mentions this in her sermon 'Outside the Camp,' in *The Undoing of Death*)

I think Jesus shows his wounds to put Thomas on equal and substantive ground. I think Jesus shows his wounds to touch Thomas' inner landscape with assurance that he wasn't alone. I think Jesus wants Thomas to know, "Yes, I did hear your voice when you called to me out of the deep." I think Jesus leans into Thomas to give Thomas the confidence to wear his wounds in the same visible way so that the world might be healed by his transparency. The promise of the resurrection is that while our wounds might not ever heal, they may begin healing

in others. In essence, Jesus invites Thomas to the fierce commitment to pay attention; to open himself to seeing in such a way as to risk being drawn into involving engagement with all he beholds. (Douglas Christie as quoted in Bahnson's article) Jesus is paying attention to Thomas so that Thomas can pay attention to others. Jesus' wounds make him our best companion when we give ourselves over to licking our wounds. He knows. He's been there. There is nothing that hurts us that Jesus does not personally know. (Barbara Brown Taylor, "May He Not Rest in Peace," *God in Pain*, p. 129)

Steve Garnaas-Holmes, in *Unfolding Light*, writes

Unless you see the Beloved's brokenness
in your fearful desires and hurtful habits
it's not your Savior who has risen.
Unless your Christ bears the scars
of your own behavior, it's not you they will save,
not your sin borne off to hell, not your betrayal
forgiven,
not your life changed...

***I think Jesus wants
Thomas to know, "Yes,
I did hear your voice
when you called to me
out of the deep."***

And unless your despair is swallowed up in forgiveness
and your greed changed by gratitude
and your heart emptied out in love and courage
you don't believe, you just wish.

But when [the Beloved's brokenness] drops you to
your knees, blessed are you.
Rejoice, for you stand before the Living One
who offers ... new life.

It has become our habit to put a wooden cross on
the corner of 22nd and University during Lent. The
Worship Committee makes sure the cross is securely
staked into the ground, and they drape it with a
purple cloth as a symbol to the outside world that
the journey to the cross has begun. (I have wondered
if we should leave the cross there permanently as no
one had a wreck during Lent, but the first day it was
down, WHAM! Glass everywhere!)

At the beginning of Holy Week, Dennis Hodtwalker
replaced the purple cloth with a black one. I called
Dennis. "Umm, Dennis, the cloth is supposed to be
red for Passion Week." He promised he would take
care of it so when I came in the next day, I was not
surprised to find that there was no cloth adorning
the cross. I just thought Dennis was in the process
of swapping them out. But Dennis did not touch that
black cloth. Someone took it.

Now my imagination can fill in the blanks, as can
yours, but in relation to today's scripture, I imagine
some Thomas needing the comfort and security of
that material. Don't you know there was some solace
in being wrapped up in the darkness of God's great
pain? ...of seeing the wounds, raw and fresh ...of
feeling God's arm surround you with comfort and
assurance no matter the circumstance, no matter the
sin, no matter the failure. Just love for you as you
hide up under the hard outer protective shell.

The invitation today is for you to come out from
under that shell and make your wounds visible. And
in the showing, may we lean into one another with
the comforting assurance of God's presence with us,
healing us with that resurrection power until we too
confess "My Lord and my God." May it be so, Amen.