SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*“A Record of Suffering and Love”*

Every year, on the second Sunday of Easter, this story about Jesus and Thomas is one of the suggested lessons for the day. Only in the Gospel of John do we find the story, only he recorded it, and for many of the “second Sundays of Easter,” I have chosen to preach from this passage.

The reason is I like Thomas and have always felt bad for him and the way most of us think of him as having had a flawed or incomplete faith. “Doubting Thomas” we call him. I think we make him sound unbelieving mostly because we find his demand to see and touch Christ’s wounds to be kind of, well really kind of rude.

Last year, as I preached this passage, I suggested that Thomas’ demands were not simply petulance or unbelief, I said they were expressions of disappointment. They were the kind of thing you say when you feel left out or excluded from some amazing experience your friends have just had.

As they gush and swoon over the wonderful thing that has just happened to them, you pull back. To cover your disappointment, to cover your hurt, you say you do not really mind that you “missed out”—that was the way I was thinking and feeling about Thomas last year—he was only feeling left out and hurt.

However, as I was preparing to preach about Thomas’ story this year, I stumbled onto a commentary that redirected my attention away from Thomas and his doubting. Indeed, I almost forgot about Thomas as the article turned my attention from Thomas and toward the scars on Jesus’ hands and side that Thomas was so insistent on seeing and touching.

The author of the commentary, the Rev. Serena Rice, is the pastor of Abiding Peace Lutheran Church in Budd Lake, New Jersey. In a short essay on this passage, Rev. Rice wrote something really intriguing. She opened her essay with these words:

*If you really want to know about a person, ask them the story of their scars.* [Do not] *do so lightly,* [instead] *allow them to share when they are ready. It is a highly personal question. But if they are ready to share and you are prepared to be invited into the truth about experiences of pain and fear, and if you are willing to make space for confession about how difficult – and sometimes incomplete – the process of healing can be,* [then] *scars are a powerful way to learn the depths of another person’s story.*

What an intriguing idea and very true. It seems to me that the story of the scars we carry are often private—a sensitive topic that we do not broach with just anyone. We simply react to them.

In Thomas’ and Jesus’ time, most people would not have been hesitant about expressing their feelings about a scar, or any other physical difference someone might have had. Therefore, scars and other differences (even birthmarks) were hidden. Difference was not tolerated as well as it is now. Indeed, most of us can remember a time when a lot of the physical diversity we live with now—including scars—was hidden away. In Thomas’ and Jesus’ time, scars and other differences were usually met with rejection.

When you think about it, most of us do our best to hide the scars we carry—the physical but also the spiritual/emotional scars—and it is little wonder given human history and the way we have dealt with scars and difference.

We hide our own scars because often we judge ourselves. We believe our scars make us ugly, that anyone seeing them will find us ugly and find our appearance disturbing or distressing. We hide our scars so we will not be judged. We hide them so that we will not be pitied or rejected.

Often, we hide our scars even from ourselves. That is, we cover them up so that we will not be asked about them. So that we will not have to recount, yet again, our story of injury, trauma, and fear. The under-lying fear is the fear of being vulnerable and judged—how much more traumatic is it for someone to know how you came to be scarred, and then reject and avoid you based on that knowledge?

Considering all of that, when I turn back to this story of Thomas and the Risen Christ the scene, for me, transcends into something quite different than doubt. It becomes something much more human, divine, and precious.

Now, having said that, I wish I could attribute to Thomas something other than doubt. I would like to say definitively that Thomas’ demand to see the scars in Jesus’ hands and to put his hand into the wound in Jesus’ side was something like a desire to see Jesus at his physically weakest and most needful so that he, so that Thomas, could be the source of compassion and healing for him; so that he could join Jesus in his suffering and be in solidarity with him.

I wish I could say that Thomas wanted a more intimate exposure to Jesus wounds so that he could more clearly bear witness to Jesus’ suffering on our behalf. All of these possible reasons for why he would make such a demand would be appropriate, righteous, even blessed.

Unfortunately, the text—as it is—does not support such a reading. We are only told what he demanded. However, that is all right because Christ’s response more than makes up for Thomas’ demand.

Christ’s response is an offer.

When Christ appears his first act, after offering the disciples his peace, is to offer Thomas his hands, and invite him to put his finger in the nail holes on them. Then he draws close, moves aside his garment, and uncovers the wound in his side for Thomas to put his hand into.

Christ is resurrected, but the wounds he received in life have not been erased, they remain. The marks of his suffering, they are real, and he continues to carry them because he wants us to know that he understands *our* suffering. *His* scars remain because *our* scars do, too, and he has intimate, first-hand knowledge of what it takes to receive scars.

Christ is resurrected, but the wounds the world inflicted on his body remains. They remain for Thomas to see, but they also remain as a powerful revelation testifying to the lengths God will go to show us the infinite nature of God’s love for humankind.

The scars also testify to a new sense of unity God has formed with us through the crucifixion—God knows how we suffer. God knows what we suffer. Never again will we be able to tell ourselves that we are alone in our suffering, or that God does not know how we feel when we are broken and grieving. Jesus’ scars remain to tell that story.

Finally, Jesus’ scars remain and have the power to redeem *our* scars. To again quote the Rev. Serena Rice:

*This story offers us a powerful example of what happens when there is permission to acknowledge pain, rather than covering it up as though it were a source of shame or fear. Jesus’s scars were an important element of his resurrected life; they bore witness that new life does not erase what came before but rather transforms it into a resource for faith. In the same way, the body of Christ in the church can create space for new life and hope when we create ways to acknowledge and talk about pain. When we witness to a Christ with scars on his hands and side, we communicate God’s welcome for the brokenness in our bodies and our lives.*

As I said before, I like Thomas, but I also want, from now on, to remember this story is not about him and his doubt. It is, and always has been, about the Risen Christ, who carries in his body the evidence of great suffering so that we will never despair.

Christ carries in his body a record of pain that we may come to have new confidence that we are loved, a new faith grounded in God’s faithfulness displayed by Jesus’ journey to the cross, and a love so tremendous that it brought him out of the tomb that we may have new life through him.

I pray that you and I will remember Thomas—not his doubt—but how he returned his, and our attention to Christ’s scars, and beliefs. May you and I do likewise. Amen.