

Sermon (4/23/17, John 20: 19-31):

I'm not sure how it started but, at some point during our reminiscing at a casual gathering with friends, we began to talk about our scars. At first, it began small – a mark on a finger, a white spot on an arm, or the scar I pointed out on my chin which I got when I was a toddler learning how to walk.

As the inevitable one-upmanship of scar talk usually goes, the stories gradually grew more gruesome. One of my friends pulled up a pants' leg to reveal a long scar across his knee cap inclusive of marks where the stitches were. As he told us his story of a football accident, we all grimaced as if we personally felt the pain of his accident.

Another friend showed us a nasty scar on his head hidden beneath his hair.

“That came from my fall into a ravine off a cliff.” He said.

We all knew that story well as it was shared among us when it first happened. It was a horrible fall and we weren't sure our friend would make it. At the time, however, we were told that, even then, our friend had not lost his sense of humor. As the rescue workers carried him up the side of the ravine to a waiting ambulance, he suggested they give him an IV of D5W Ringer's lactate...the same stuff they often used on a television series we watched called, 'Emergency'.

My guess is that if we were to have a similar type of discussion, we'd all have our share of physical scars to show along with the stories that went with them. To be sure, it would make for a very odd sort of congregational meeting.

Physical scars, as we've come to learn, aren't the only kind of scars we carry, though. Perhaps, we've seen this most pronounced in the mental and emotional trauma inflicted upon veterans from

wartime experiences, otherwise known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

The offices of counselors, psychologists, and support groups are also filled with stories that come from the mental and emotional scars we struggle to cope with – the intensity of grief that accompanies loss, the trauma of physical and emotional abuse, the shame of regret and past mistakes, the hurt of rejection and betrayal, to name just a few. Perhaps the mental scars we carry are even more numerous than the physical ones.

For good, ill, and just about everything in between, these scars are a part of who we are. They define us, shape us, and influence us. They are a part of what makes us as unique as our fingerprints.

It's no surprise, then, to read in today's text that it's the showing of Jesus' scars that push the disciples over the belief line. Up to this point, they had locked themselves behind closed doors even though Mary had told them she had seen the risen Jesus. Understandably, it was difficult for them to make that leap even with Mary's convincing testimony. Dead men just don't return to life. Perhaps, they thought, in her grief Mary was hallucinating. Grief does that. For any of us who have known grief's company, we understand how it can do funny things to the brain and the senses.

So, hidden the disciples remained, locked behind closed doors hoping to protect themselves from the dangers that lurked just beyond the door. And while they huddled, bodies trembling, the risen Jesus appeared to them. His first word to them is, 'Peace', perhaps sensitive to how frightening his appearance would be. He immediately follows that with a scar display – holding out his hands to show the holes from the nails and hitching up his shirt to show them the place where he had been pierced by a Roman

Soldier's spear.

Thomas often gets a bad rap for being the doubting one; the one who's faith was unable to be satisfied with the testimony the others gave about Jesus' appearance while he was out and about. 'I will only believe when I can personally touch his wounds.' Thomas said.

It's important to note, though, that what Thomas was asking for was no less than that which had convinced the disciples that Jesus had risen from the dead – the wounds in his hands and side, the scars.

It's interesting, don't you think, that Jesus' risen body retained the physical wounds of the cross? Even more so, his mind also carried the scars of what had been done to him – the rejection, the mockery, the hate, the fear, the isolation, and the horror of his death. For all of eternity, Jesus carries this with him and it is the place where our lives, and the scars that are a part of us, converge with the risen Christ.

Without the scars Jesus' retained, it would be difficult for us to relate to this Son of the Living God. Jesus would be a good guy, a wise mentor, a true conduit of holy grace but Savior? I don't know. Without the scars God would feel aloof, beyond our reach, a nice ideal, maybe even a good and helpful ideal but real? That's a line that would be difficult to cross.

We can, I think, find comfort in knowing that this was also true for those who knew Jesus most personally-those who had eaten with him, seen his miracles, experienced the transforming power of his teachings, witnessed the life-saving gifts he gave to so many. Even they found it difficult to believe that one who was dead could live again and it would be wrong, I think, for us to be too condemning of them.

It seems to me that the appearance of Jesus would have never been as convincing as it ended up being without the scars. It was the scars that tipped the scale. It was the scars that connected the dots between the Jesus before the cross and the Jesus of the empty tomb. It's Jesus' scars that move us to consider that, perhaps, the very scars we carry are the point where our lives intersect most acutely with the redeeming power of Jesus' resurrection.

While there are so many scars my mind and body carry, which I would never want to relive, I also know they are a part of what makes me, me. It's these very wounds that have enabled me to tend to the wounds of others. It's these very wounds that have enabled me to weep with those who weep. It's these very wounds that have moved casual friendships to life-sustaining, deeply cherished bonds. It's these very scars that have turned grieving mothers into advocates against drunk driving. It's these very scars that makes 12 step addiction programs work as each participant lifts their shirt to show the deep wounds their addictions have caused. It's these very scars that define support groups which enable one to find a common, life strengthening bond with others who have experienced something similar. It's these very wounds that often push us to search for the living water Christ offers.

It's also what makes the church unique; different from all other communities and/or social groups we might be a part of. Notice what happens after Jesus shows the disciples his pierced hand and side, enabling the disciples to move from fear to belief. Jesus' breathes on them saying, 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' In the matter of a few sentences the disciples move from fear, to belief, to Christ bearers, scars and all. It's a reminder, I guess, that to follow this Christ, to be the church, means being ready to share our scars as well as endure the scars that come from

following this Christ who demands justice and love in a world where such things are often in short supply. It's the scars that make our witness most convincing. It's our willingness to risk the vulnerability of showing and sharing our scars that makes faith most tangible.

So, maybe, holding a congregational meeting of scar sharing isn't so far-fetched of an idea after all. In a way, it's what Jesus does every time we come to the communion table...my body broken for you, my blood spilt for you. Remember the scars, remember your scars, it is what God uses to turn doubt into faith and to prove that even the worst of wounds, death, will one day be just a scar that we point to and remember.

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.