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John 20:19-31
Changed by Death
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When 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." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So 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." A 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." Then 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." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But 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.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

I was listening to a podcast recently about how funerals have changed throughout history. I know you are thinking, "Camille, you need to get out more" and yes, I had that same thought myself. But it was interesting. Tom Long is a professor at Emory University, and he spoke about his book called *The Good Funeral*. Professor Long begrudges when a pastor does not powerfully preach about resurrection at funerals and instead assumes the role of the MC at some kind of this-is-your-life celebration. Long says that Capital "D" Death comes to every funeral trying to preach the loudest sermon. I am death and I won. I am death and I have the last word. I am death and I am the end. In light of Jesus' resurrection, the preacher at the funeral must retort, "O, death, where's is your victory? "Where is your sting?"

For the disciples, Death had preached a very convincing sermon on Good Friday and so they were hidden away in a locked room trying to figure out their next moves. Then Jesus appeared to them and said, "Do not be afraid." Today is unofficially called 'Doubting Thomas Sunday' in the church. It is this Sunday when we read this perennial text about Thomas missing the first appearance from Jesus to the disciples. After hearing about Jesus' miraculous arrival from his friends, Thomas demanded more proof. He wanted to see for himself that Death had not been the winner and that Jesus had in fact risen from the dead.

Now before we start labeling Thomas a doubter, let's at least consider the situation. It was the evening of the first day, Easter Sunday. Very little time has passed. The disciples have retreated to an unspecified location and locked the doors. These disciples are afraid. Now they have already

been alerted by Mary about Jesus' resurrection and yet they are in hiding. Jesus bursts through the locked doors and offers them more than a testimony about resurrection, he offers them physical evidence. Immediately, Jesus shows them his hand and his side, and it is then that the disciples rejoice. The testimony from Mary about the resurrection wasn't enough for them, they needed to see for themselves. The same was true for Thomas, it is just that Thomas was just more articulate about what he needed to cross the line over to the side of belief. Thomas, famously, requires the same evidentiary standard as the other disciples. He wants to see the scars.

Let's pause over this specific detail of the story, the resurrected body of Jesus still carried the scars of his crucifixion. After Jesus had died and been buried in a tomb and then rose from the dead, his body still was marked. In rising Jesus to new life, those scars could have been erased and his body returned to its pre-crucified form. But it wasn't! Theologically, this is interesting.

It is interesting for Jesus too because the very first thing Jesus did when he appeared to the disciples hidden in the locked room was to show them his scars. Jesus holds out his hands and lifts his shirt and reveals the wounds his body still carries. And it was the scars that engendered belief, from the disciples, and then also from Thomas. Thomas asked to see proof and the evidence was given. Put your fingers here. Touch my side. Come and see, Thomas. It is okay. Death is not the best preacher in the room. I am.

The Italian baroque painter Caravaggio has a painting titled *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*. In the painting, Thomas looks anxious and weary as he peers into the wound on Christ's side, Christ's hand guides Thomas's finger to the wound. The other disciples peer over his shoulder intently. Christ looks calm and rested. The light in the painting radiates from Christ and begins to touch the disciples as they get closer to Jesus.

The focus in the painting and in the doubting Thomas story really is on the remaining wounds. Somehow these wounds are transformative for belief. Seeing the body, that was dead, now raised, yet having been changed by death is the concluding evidence that is needed to turn doubters into disciples.

Thomas Aquinas in his theological writings gave five reasons Christ needed to hold onto those scars. The first reason he says, "He kept his scars not from inability to heal them, "But to wear them as an everlasting trophy of his victory." The scars on our bodies tell stories. The scar on my right knee comes from riding a skateboard while holding onto a waterski rope tied to the back of my older brother's BMX bike. My scar mostly exemplifies stupidity. Christ's scars exemplify love. They are reminders of the pain and the suffering but mostly they are visible reminders of God's love for the world. When you look at the resurrected body of Christ, you are reminded of the love and the sacrifice, and those reminders inspire belief.

A friend of mine imparted wisdom to me that you can tell your child 500 times to say thank you or please and they will forget every time. But if you say a bad word in front of them, they will never, ever forget it. The reason I thought of this is because I wondered if Christ felt a little bit like this, he had told the disciples 500 times to believe in him and they forgot. He told them 500 times he loved them, and they doubted him. But then, he shows up with scars on his hands and they would never ever forget it; seeing Jesus with those scars changed something within them.

It was important for them to see that the experience of death for Christ changed him and that his resurrection did not remove what he went through. He was marked by his sufferings and by his death. Just like us, the things we endure in our lives are not erased just because some time has passed, or new chapters have begun. We live with scars on our bodies and on our hearts, and Christ's witness shows us this is not something to be ashamed of.

Duke Divinity School's Kate Bowler said, "We bear all the ruins of the lives we've lived and the loves we've endured. What a gift to have a Savior who does the same." Bearing wounds to one another is an act of vulnerability. Typically, we try to hide or remove our scars, our wounds, our pains. Scars, stretch marks, wrinkles – all highly undesirable things for the skin to hold. But we've got major industries out there focused on helping to hide, reverse, remove all evidence of anything but perfection from our bodies. How different then for Christ to eagerly share his scars as though he is proud of them!

Peggy Wehmeyer, a former religion correspondent for ABC, wrote, "If Jesus showed us his scars, even after his Resurrection, then maybe we can learn to integrate pain and suffering into our lives in a way that frees us from wasting energy spent in denial and shame." Jesus' wounded resurrected body, gives us permission to be vulnerable with our own stories. Stories about the wounds of grief, the pain of mistakes, the consequences of failure – all of these could be points of connection and even sources of inspiration for others.

Jesus is invitational with the disciples and his openness moves them from fear to service. I understand that it is countercultural to share openly about the shadowy sides of life and your personal struggles but everything about Christianity is countercultural. So, what if this year on the Sunday after Easter, the message isn't just go out and go and tell the good news. But what if the commissioning is to go out and be vulnerable. Invite people into your life and your heart in a way that is more than just surface chatter. Tell them what is real for you and hard for you and holy for you. Talk about your questions of faith and your wrestling's with the world. Speak about what you love and what you have lost and what you are hoping to find. Even be so bold to say something about Jesus – just how it is that your faith strengthens you, guides you, inspires you.

Christ taught us that our stories, even the hard and painful chapters, can be transformative for others. Christ showed us, with the scars on his body, we are not alone in being marked by the growing pains of life.

While Christ was changed by death, Death did not have the final word, and he had the scars to prove it.

Thanks be to God. Amen.