

April 23, 2017
Second Sunday of Easter
“He Comes Back”
John 20:19-29

Introduction

When I was a hospital chaplain, some of the more difficult times for me came when patients wanted me to look at their wounds. They wanted me to see the hole in their stomach, or their gangrene foot, or the container of bloody liquid that the tube had taken out of their chest. I understood. This was their body, wounded, under attack, and they needed to talk about it and show someone. I understood, but that it did not make it any easier.

I remember one patient who had been out walking her dog, and she had wrapped the dog's lease around her fingers. Suddenly the dog jerked forward to chase another dog, and the force of the jerk ripped off two of her fingers. The surgeon had reattached the fingers and then ordered leaches to be placed on the fingers to suck the blood flow into the fingers in an effort to save them.

I went to the woman's room. The air in the room was heavy with the rancid odor of blood. The woman's hand was outstretched, propped up with an open-ended container around the two reattached fingers. In the container with the fingers were the leaches.

“I cannot see my fingers,” the woman said, “will you look and see if the leaches are on them? The doctor says they have to stay on and suck the blood or I will lose my fingers. If they are off, we have got to get them back on.” I peeped into the bottom of the container. From what I could tell the leaches were doing what they were supposed to do. And needless to say, I was relieved.

I

Rev. Bradley Schmeling, Lutheran pastor, says he is impressed with Thomas. Far from being simply a doubter or an example of weakness, Thomas is actually pretty bold. He wants to touch the wounds of Jesus. He wants not only to see the holes in Jesus' hands, he wants to put his finger in them. He wants to put his hand in the side that was pierced.

Search Thomas on the internet, and click images to see paintings of this scene. If you are into graphic and gory, you will love the images. The blood-stained holes are in Jesus' hands. The wound in his side is gaping.

But wait, this is the resurrected body of Jesus. Would you not think that the heavenly resurrected body of Jesus would be without wounds and the scars of life? Apparently not. Apparently in the new heaven, Jesus is still the crucified one.

And the way to know his resurrection is real is to come close to the wounds created by his suffering and death.

We are not sure what to make of this. It sort of goes against the grain. We prefer to imagine a resurrection in which all signs of suffering are gone. I for sure would prefer a perfect body for eternity, endless praise around the throne of God with a strong, fit body, glowing, wrinkle-free skin, and great hair. That would be Easter for me.

We have this idea that being heavenly, made new, raised, means going through a kind of cosmic plastic surgery. But that is not the picture the gospels give about resurrection. The living Jesus is recognized by his wounds.

In some kind of divine way, life with God and brokenness are bound together. Redemption and suffering are linked. So the resurrected body is different from the perfect body. Our disabilities, our wounds are part of who we are, and they will most likely find their way to heaven with us. The difference is in heaven our disabilities, diseases, injuries will not cause pain or separate us from life abundant and communion with God and with saints. Our disabilities may not be erased, but they will be transformed.(1)

II

Thomas yearned to touch the wounds of Jesus to discover, to learn that Jesus was alive. But not just to discover that Jesus was alive, but to discover that he, Thomas, was alive also. In this story, Thomas is the one who is raised from the dead, raised to new life when he says, “My Lord and my God,” transformed through his encounter with a living, wounded Christ.

Schmeling proposes that Thomas’ desire to touch the wounds of Jesus is a type of prayer for Thomas. Prayer is the place where we stand in the presence of God and dare to touch with God the suffering of the world. Or to put it a different way, in prayer we stand next to God’s suffering as God experiences the world’s suffering.

So on Sunday morning when we pray the prayers of the people, we reach out to touch the wounds of those for whom we pray. We reach out and touch both families and soldiers wounded in war. We reach out and touch those wounded by oppression and injustice. We even reach out and touch God’s good earth as it is wounded through abuse and pollution.

In our prayer, we ask God to let our touch be used in God’s healing. I understand there is an African language where the people instead of praying, “John is sick,” pray, “We are sick in John.” Do you hear that? It is more than praying pretty words on behalf of someone. It is saying we feel the sickness as we reach out and touch this person’s wounds.

And through that we become alive like Thomas, through our touching the world and its wounds.(2)

III

And then we make room so that the Spirit can come and touch our wounds. We know God hears our deep desires and laments in our suffering. And resurrection and transformation do come, but not always in the way we expect.

One of the mysteries of the gospel is how Jesus chose not to pass the cup of suffering, but to trust that God's will would be done even in suffering and death. And that in dying something new would occur.

I do not understand completely how that works. But this I know: In the very depths of human suffering, the Lord of life comes to us. Comes in the midst of it with the promise that suffering and death will never have the last word. God always has the last word. And that word is life. (3)

Conclusion

In his grief and loss, in his disbelief and disillusionment, Thomas needed to see and touch Jesus. So Jesus came back to him.

Look back over your life, the mistakes you have made, the times you have gone your own way, turned away from God, and become lost. Time and again, Jesus has come back for you and given you what you needed to believe.

We are here this morning because the risen Christ chose to come to us, appear to us, reach out to us. That is what a risen Savior does. He comes back again and again to the very ones who betray and disappoint him. In life, in death, in life beyond death, this is our hope. The risen Christ comes back to us.(4)

A week after appearing to the other disciples, Jesus came back to Thomas to give him what he needed. Thomas did not choose to touch the Lord, because he had no more doubts, no more questions. All he could do was confess, "My Lord and my God!"

Even though Jesus says the greater blessing is for those who can believe without seeing, most of us are like Thomas. We need more to help us believe.

And on this Sunday, a week after Easter, it is to us that the risen, wounded Lord comes. He reaches out to us and says, "Peace be with you. Do not doubt but believe."

May we respond with Thomas, "My Lord and my God." Amen.

Notes:

1. Adapted from sermon on John 20:19-29 preached by Bradley Schmeling, Montreat Music and Worship Conference Week 2, Montreat, NC, June 26, 2013.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. William H. Willimon, "He Came Back," sermon on Mark 16:2-7; 1 Corinthians 15:3- 8, March 01, 2007, <http://www.preaching.com/sermons/11547138/>.