

April 23, 2017

(John 20: 19 - 31)

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

How different today seems from last Sunday. Just one week ago, we sparkled and smiled and sang and soared. But today, I suspect that many of us feel as though we are right back where we were before Easter - fighting familiar frustrations and bearing well known burdens, as if Easter had never occurred. Why is that? Because, in this past week, real life has worn us down and invaded our Easter euphoria. The very nature of living causes us to endure bumps and bruises and warts and scars of all types and shapes, visible and invisible.

For example, in the movie "Jaws", three men are out at sea searching for the man-eating Great White Shark. During a lull in their search, they find themselves sharing coffee and sharing horror stories. Each one has scars and each one tries to one up each other. One of the characters has scars from the war, another has scars from a previous shark attack. The character played by Richard Dreyfus rips open his shirt and points to his chest without speaking a word. Another man asks, "What? Bypass surgery?"

"No," answers Dreyfus. "Betty Sue, 7th grade. She broke my heart."

All of us have scars. You cannot live life without being hurt. As I like to say, "it is not the years, but the miles".

So, amidst the toil and pain and scarring of real life, we gather together today in hopeful celebration of a continuing season of Easter that seems to be fading into the empty candy wrappers left by the Easter Bunny.

Yet, in a world of increasing violence, degradation, suffering and disregard for individual human dignity and life, how do we hope, even in God? Last Sunday, we talked...from the heart...on the difference in dynamics between a memorial for a historic event and the opening into a deepening relationship with the living God...the one who should be **our** living God.

Isn't that difference in dynamic exactly what Thomas was raising? He was not there when Jesus first showed up for the others....to experience the presence of the resurrected Christ who came to the others and spoke words of peace and showed them his crucified hands. John's gospel says that "The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord"...all, that is, except Thomas.

Poor Thomas! He gave us five of the most significant words in the Gospel: "My Lord and my God!" Yet, he has been known for nearly 2,000 years as "Doubting Thomas".

He was a practical man who lived in a practical world, and this was not practical to Thomas. Jesus was

dead and, as far as he was concerned, dead means dead. Thinking in terms of the crucified Jesus, not the resurrected Christ. It is not that he did not want to believe, but he was hearing something that did not sound real. The only way Thomas would believe was to touch it and see it himself, effectively saying, "Unless I see and touch his scars, I will not believe."

So, why is this story in the Gospel? It is too easy to criticize Thomas, and I think too easy to focus on his apparent weakness in faith...how we are either like or unlike the "doubter" and then call it a day.

No, let us think deeper about Thomas. Thomas...like the others...had been in despair and loss and mourning since the crucifixion... Certainly had his share of bruises and scars within the preceding two weeks.

But God knows that we must have the reassurance of the resurrection of Christ. We need the hope of life. Of life after the bruising and scarring, the life Jesus blessed them and us with by **commanding** that "Peace be with you."

But how do we get there? Isn't **that** the great question, in our hearts day after day? God seems so distant from us so often, particularly when we get scarred. With all the scars and pain around us, how do we reach out to God? Where in this time and place do we find that peace? What in the world is Jesus talking about...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!" ...and there it is!! Again, ask yourselves why this story is in the Gospel. What do these scars mean?

What do these scars mean to us? Absolutely everything....if we think about it.

We get suspicious about people who seem to be "too perfect". About little children who do not have skinned knees. About teenagers who do not show any signs of acne or cruise with their life journey through adolescence. About models whose hair is perfect the moment they step out of the surf. About people who are in their senior years without signs of graying hair or wrinkled faces.

People who have no apparent "scars" seem to have missed out on life. But, that is not our God.

It is strange, but the resurrection that brought Christ back to life also left Him scarred. Here is Jesus, the man, appearing to his friends and showing them the scars that his life, his suffering, and his death inflicted on him.

Is it not amazing that, whatever occurred at the time of the resurrection, the scars were not obliterated? The scars of his human life remained..and they are still there.

We have a permanently scarred God.

He comes to be with us, with whatever scars we bear, with whatever wounds we carry, and with whatever doubts we harbor.

What does it all mean? It means that we can be done....DONE, People...as in forever. We can be done with the fantasy..the mis-directed notion...that we have to look for God. For a God who is far away from us.

God comes to be with us. All busted up, and broken. Just in time for our broken world.

The same world that Thomas and we face together. Think about what it means for Christ to have scars and wounds. Isn't that incredible? It is an amazing demonstration of God's love for us....that he would continue to carry the scars, the reminders of the pain and humiliation he went through.

We have so much trouble figuring this out. We do not get this crazy idea of the gift of supreme grace from our loving God because we are too conditioned otherwise. "What do you mean...something for nothing?" We are used to earning what we have. To work for anything we value. We work for our wages. We study for our exams. Whatever we have in this life is from our effort, right?

Thomas said and lived the same thing. I have to see it to believe it...because my life, and the life of all humanity before or since says that to "have it, I gotta go get it". That is the whole idea of scars and wounds and warts and bruises...to show ourselves and the world that we have made the efforts in life. The proof.

God says, "I have scars and wounds, too...so believe". We do not have to go looking for the presence of God any longer, and we do not have to wonder where that "peace" is. The kingdom of God **is** at hand, and has been for two thousand years...it is just that we have been looking too hard **for** it, and not recognizing the hands that are already before us. The hands that are pierced...holding us up, holding us close, and hugging us into the embrace of the loving Trinity of God known to us as the Father, and as the Son, and as the Holy Spirit.

Amen.