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1 John 1:1-2:2

John 20:19-31

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## DOUBTS AND SCARS

They were a faith community. They believed that God's power at work in the world could make a difference in their lives, and yet... They had heard resurrection news, but how would we characterize First Church, Jerusalem as that first Easter day drew to a close? If they would have had a website, how would they have presented themselves? 'The friendly church where all are welcome'? Hardly. The locked doors behind which they gathered were not a sign of hospitality. 'The church with a warm heart and a bold mission?' Forget it. This is the church of sweaty palms and shaky knees and a double-bolted front door. They resembled a tomb more than a church.

Our reading from the Gospel of John often leads to a focus on one of the disciples named Thomas who expresses his doubts, when in reality, all of the followers had difficulty fully believing the resurrection news they had heard. Oh, to be a fly on the wall of the house where the disciples were that first Easter evening. What do you think might have been the nature of their conversation? Mary Magdalene had told them the amazing news that she had seen the risen Lord earlier that morning. Others had gone to the tomb and had confirmed that it was empty except for the linen wrappings lying there which had covered Jesus' body. Mary was elsewhere that evening. Those who had followed Jesus must have gone over her story repeatedly, with at least some of them wondering whether she might have suffered a mental breakdown. And yet the tomb was empty. If Jesus had been raised, where was he? Certainly, they had asked her how he had looked. Mary had told them that she didn't recognize him at first, but she admitted she had been crying at the time. Could she, who had been a close follower, have mistaken someone else for Jesus? If it was someone other than Jesus whom she had seen, then where had their Lord's body been taken and why were the grave clothes still there? Their heads and their hearts must have been reeling.

I wonder if this was the first time the disciples had been back together since they had scattered after Jesus' arrest. Would Peter have talked to the others about his triple denial of knowing Jesus? Would the others have expressed regret about not standing with their Lord when things moved toward his execution? None of the gospel accounts give us details about such conversations at this critical time. What the Gospel of John does tell us is that on that Sunday evening, they were together in a house with the doors locked because they were feeling vulnerable and scared. But then somehow, Jesus was standing in their midst. He could have chided them for abandoning him when he was on trial and when he was being crucified. He could have cross-examined them as to whether they had believed Mary Magdalene when she shared of her experience of the resurrection. But he knew what they needed and he knew who he was. So, he says, "Peace be with you." It was more than just a greeting, or even a wish. It was an affirmation that he wanted them to believe in order to be able to receive the peace he offered them. During their last meal together, he had told them, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." This was not the gift of an escape from stress or an exemption from suffering or conflict. No, for as he says, "Peace be with you," he is showing them wounds in his hands and side. What he is doing is giving them reason to believe that whatever the world inflicts upon those who are faithful, by God's grace, it won't have the last word about them. Instead of abandoning them in their shortcomings, he gives them joyful purpose and the power of the Holy Spirit so they could become witnesses of and for the resurrection.

I mentioned the disciple named Thomas earlier – he wasn't there that night. Perhaps he was less frightened than had been the others and felt less need to be behind locked doors. On their way to Jerusalem, he had expressed his willingness to die with Jesus. The other disciples told Thomas the same thing that Mary Magdalene had told them – they had seen the Lord. They must have also told him every detail about their time with Jesus that evening, including that they had seen his wounded hands and side. Thomas told them that he not only wanted to see Jesus, but to also touch him at the place of his woundedness.

By God's grace, he has opportunity for his own resurrection experience a week later. Take note that when Jesus shows up, he doesn't criticize Thomas for saying

what he needed in order to believe. Instead, he says what he had said on the previous occasion, “Peace be with you.” And then he offers Thomas what he said he needed – the opportunity to touch the wounds in his hands and side.

Doubt is not a four-letter word. Many of our great scientific and medical discoveries have come about because someone doubted previously held assumptions. Look at Jesus – when he rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, he was quite aware that the crowds were looking for a military leader to overthrow the Romans who were oppressing them, but Jesus doubted that was how the Prince of Peace should conduct himself. He had been raised with the understanding that an eye for an eye was an appropriate way to respond to violence, but he doubted that the world would be better off with two visually-impaired people instead of one, therefore he explored how loving one’s enemies is actually more in keeping with God’s will. Jesus was raised in a culture that said women do not have rights, Samaritans are an inferior race, and sick people probably brought their own illness upon themselves through sinfulness. Jesus doubted that such ‘truths’ made sense in light of God’s peace and love.

We tend to tsk, tsk Thomas for expressing his need to see and touch the Lord again. But he had suffered great loss. No one is unscarred by living. All of Jesus’ followers must have felt great bereavement when Jesus was crucified. They couldn’t have felt very good either about their lack of loyalty and courage when things got tough. They were wounded; they were scarred. Yet, Jesus, this One who embodied God’s grace, comes among them and freely shows his own scars, and says to them: “Peace be with you.” He was saying to them and even to us, “My peace be with all who grieve; my peace be with all who are afraid; my peace be with those who need forgiveness; my peace be with those who have their doubts about whether God’s presence is something real that makes a difference.”

Concealing one’s vulnerabilities and wounds seems to be a practice much in vogue. Yet, it is quite in contrast to the practice of our Risen Lord, who by God’s power overcame death, but still had scars from his crucifixion which he openly showed. A child might ask, “If God raised Jesus from the dead, why didn’t God fix him up?”

Why did he still have the scars? Why were the print of nails still in his hands? Why was the gash in Jesus' side still there?

One might answer that it was proof that the risen Lord was the same as the Jesus who died on the cross. God sure could have fixed Jesus all up. But isn't there a message in this gospel story that the resurrected Christ is forever the wounded Christ? Those who are hearing-impaired who use sign language know that the sign for Jesus is quickly placing the middle finger of each hand into the palm of the other. Jesus is identified as the one with wounded hands. When they touch their hands, they hear the name in their own flesh. And they know that this Jesus does not wait until we're all fixed up to meet us.

That First Church of Jerusalem faced some challenges that we don't face. Our church faces some challenges they didn't face. But by God's grace, the Risen Lord shows up among us as he did for his earlier followers. All of us have some physical or emotional scars. But picture a church where it is o.k. to share vulnerabilities and problems, fears and doubts, because they will be met with compassion and prayer. Picture a church whose worship reflects resurrection joy every Sunday. Picture a church that boldly joins in our Lord's ministry to others who also have doubts and scars. That is a church responding to the presence of its Risen Lord. That is a church that has experienced resurrection itself. Touch the palms of your hands. The word is Jesus.