

“The Scars Tell the Story”
John 20:19–31
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First Baptist Church, Raleigh
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Welcome to the week after. For those of you who are married and had a traditional wedding ceremony with lots of people, do you remember the day after your wedding? You have just experienced the biggest, most joyful celebration, after probably months and months of planning. Your feet were probably a little swollen, and even if you're an extrovert, you're just depleted from the hundreds of social interactions with every person you've ever known in your entire life that showed up to see you get married. The week after Easter feels a little like this for me. We gathered for worship last week, the sanctuary was as full as I've seen it in 2.5 years, the dioce filled with gorgeous lilies. We proclaimed Christ has risen, the tomb is empty, love wins, death does not have the final say. We heard the hallelujah chorus, for God's sake! And now we find ourselves here today. The egg hunts are over, the lilies have all been taken home, there's probably not a big brunch with your extended family today. And we have to ask ourselves, what do we do now? How do we live in this post-resurrection world as Easter people? We are a resurrection people, right? As my New Testament professor Dr. Wakefield used to say at the end of reading a scripture passage, “so what?” Where do we go from here?

It was a beautiful spring day...I was sitting in the back of Ms. Holloman's English class at Washington High School. I will be the first to tell you, I did not thrive in high school. The catty friends, the exclusive lunchroom table groups, the fights in the hallway, Geometry, low rise jeans, makeup that was 2 shades to dark for my face, frizzy

hair, braces, those blue cafeteria trays that held square pizza and canned corn, need I say more? My palms get sweaty just thinking about my high school experience. But Ms. Holloman had a way of drawing me in as a student who asked a lot of questions and loved to write. She had this delightfully quirky spirit, and she was always searching for ways to breathe new life into the centuries old texts we were reading. As a side note, there was some sort of argument happening amongst the staff at the high school during this time about curriculum. As students we didn't completely know what was going on, but I remember Ms. Holloman made a huge poster and put it above the classroom door in the hallway, and the sign read "I will teach what I want, when I want." That truly doesn't have anything to do with the story, but it does capture her spunk, and probably why I was so drawn to her as a student.

On this particular day, we were discussing songs that told a story, and we had just listened to the song, "Lighthouse" by the Americana blue grass group, Nickel Creek. We went through the composition of that song and talked about how the artists beautifully weaved this narrative throughout the music. And then at the end of class we had some extra time, so Ms Holloman said, I'm going to play you one more song by Nickel Creek. It's called "Doubting Thomas."

I was raised in a Southern Baptist church in eastern North Carolina. I was at church every single time the doors were open, and that was the first time I heard the story of Thomas — in high school English class. There are certain songs that just captivate you in a way that you're never quite the same after listening. Have you ever had the experience of hearing a song on the radio, and you are completely transported to a different period in your life? Music has the ability to take us to a different place and time, and "Doubting Thomas" by Nickel Creek does this for me. I can almost smell Ms.

Holloman's classroom, it's that vivid of a memory. I listened intently to the lyrics. *"Can I be used to help others find truth, When I'm scared that I'll find proof that it's a lie, Can I be led down a trail dropping bread crumbs, To prove I'm not ready to die, Please give me time to decipher the signs, Please forgive me for time that I've wasted, I'm a doubting Thomas, I'll take your promise, Though I know nothing's safe. O' me of little faith."*

Of course, this is a beautiful interpretation of this text from John. Please go home and listen to the full song. Now, why was that the first time that I heard the story of Thomas? And we all have a deep sense of knowing about why that is, don't we? Somehow, Thomas got conveniently left out of my childhood Sunday School curriculum, and there was no youth group lessons on this particular interaction between Jesus and Thomas in the Gospel of John. Interestingly enough, this story is one of a few in the three-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary that never changes. This is always the gospel lesson on the week after Easter. But, in Christian circles we still tend to cast Thomas in a negative light. He's the cynic, the doubter, the holdout that just needed proof. Oh stubborn Thomas who just couldn't quite grasp the joy of his fellow disciples, embracing the risen Christ without seeing it for himself. His doubt is seen as some kind of weakness or a spiritual flaw. But what if Thomas were just yearning for something more.

As we read this interaction from the Gospel of John, I'd like to note that it's always struck me that Jesus appears to the disciples in a body that is still wounded. In the Christian faith, we love a victorious story. In fact, I think we struggle to tell stories that don't end in a mountain climbed, a race won, an enemy defeated. We prefer a hardship that ends in a moment where the worst is over and brighter days are ahead. We struggle

to sit in the pain. But when Jesus shows up in this room with the disciples in his resurrected body that is **still wounded** from nails that were pounded into his hands and feet, we're reminded that some wounds are for keeps. Some trauma, grief, and loss will just remain with us in our bodies. If you live with an autoimmune disease, chronic pain, an addiction, cancer, an eating disorder — the list goes on and on — your body keeps score. And even after remission, rehab, medical treatments, even after the resurrection, some wounds remain. These scars that Jesus has are not worn in, forgotten, old wounds. We probably all have those, don't we? I have a scar on my eyebrow from when I was 3 years old and a Christmas tree stand fell out of the attic and sliced open my forehead. I have one on my right ring finger where I got into an unfortunate fight with a can opener... its a long story. When I look in the mirror in this older body, I'm not reminded of those scars...that's old hurt. But Jesus shows up with wounds so fresh, so raw, that the text says Thomas placed his fingers inside the wounds. Can't you just imagine Jesus wincing in pain?

I know a man who was the executive director of a non-profit in an inner-city area that helped people experiencing homelessness. He told this story about one of the many people that he befriended through that ministry; a woman named Rhonda. She had lost her job and got behind on bills and came to the non-profit wanting help with her electric bill. The director told Rhonda that the non-profit didn't have any more funds, there were so many people in need that month, they were out of funding, and that they couldn't help. She begged and pleaded, and after telling her no multiple times, Rhonda kept calling. Finally, he said, Rhonda if your lights get cut off, call me and I'll come sit in the dark with you.

We worship a God who shows up wounded, in the midst of our pain, our doubt and our questions. A God who doesn't reveal himself to his followers all shiny and perfect and new, but still scarred, and he does so without shame or an apology. I'm reminded that this faith is one that embraces real pain, real scars, real bodies.

Perhaps Thomas didn't want to settle for his peers' experience of the resurrection, instead he wanted to have his own. After all, we must ask ourselves if a faith that has not dared to have a real, lived encounter with the living Christ is actually faith at all. Thomas dared to step into a circle of trusted friends who were absolutely certain of what they had seen, and he was brave enough to choose vulnerability. He was brave enough to be honest and confess uncertainty. In fact, he waited in that uncertainty for one week, after his friends first said that they had seen the risen Christ. It makes me wonder what that week was like for him. Did he walk around in an absolute haze of suspense? Did he think his fellow friends were just out of their minds with delusion? Was he taken over by the fear of missing out, wondering if he would always have a faith experience secondhand? Could he even sleep?

James Fowler was an American theologian and professor of theology and human development at Emory University. Fowler was best known for his developmental model based on faith in his book, *Stages of Faith — The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. In this book he suggests that there are seven primary stages of faith in the life of an individual, starting with zero and ending with 6. I will not go into details about all the stages, but in his research, he finds that each stage corresponds with an age, up until stage 3. Most adults are in stages 3-6. Stage 4 particularly is often characterized by angst and struggle as the individual takes personal responsibility for her beliefs or feelings. Spiritual beliefs can take on greater complexity and shades of nuance,

and there is a greater sense of open-mindedness, which can at the same time open up the individual to potential conflicts as different beliefs or traditions collide. Fowler suggests that doubting is not only helpful, but it is essential for growth. Not only that, but if the individual never doubts, it's impossible to move to a deeper, multidimensional understanding of who God is in relation to oneself and the world. Fowler is not the only one. If you review the lives of the great prophets and saints from Mother Theresa to Jeremiah, you'll find plenty of evidence of doubt. Thomas Merton says that "Faith means doubt. Faith is not the suppression of doubt, it is the overcoming of doubt, and you overcome doubt by going through it."

It's been said that Jesus himself was a doubter, from a certain perspective. He doubted that long prayers and rigid dietary laws were an essential part of faith. He doubted that anger and violence were ways to resolve differences, and taught people to forgive one another. He doubted that Samaritans were of less worth than the other people of that day, telling the story of the good Samaritan and the neglectful priest. So perhaps the capacity to doubt is essential to the establishment of a meaningful faith.

Theologian Debie Thomas says it this way, "What strikes me most about Thomas's story is not that he doubted, but that he did so publicly, without shame or guilt, and that his faith community allowed him to do so. And what I love about Jesus's response is that he met Thomas right where he was, freely offering the disciple the testimony of his own wounds, his own pain. After such an encounter, I can only imagine the tenderness and urgency with which Thomas was able to repeat Christ's words to other doubters:

"Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed." Because isn't this all of us, on the Sunday after Easter? Don't we all wrestle with hidden doubts, hidden

fears? Don't we all wonder sometimes if the miracle of resurrection will hold in Ordinary Time?"

I can tell you that as a high school student sitting in the back of her English class hearing about a disciple that was brave enough to ask for proof—that was water for my parched soul. I felt relief, I felt a sense of freedom, as if I could take a deeper breath. For the first time I was hearing about a faith that didn't have to be straightforward acceptance of ironclad certainties, but one that had room for all my many questions and my longing for more. This is a faith that embraces our doubts and a risen Christ that welcomes **all of us**, all of who we are, wounds and scars, and doubts and messy questions and cynical attitudes. A faith that doesn't require us to check our brains and curious minds at the door. That faith? That's one that I can live, thanks to Thomas. May it be so for you, too.