

“Touching the Wounds of Christ”
John 20:19–31
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In my reading recently I came across a very different way of interpreting the familiar narrative of John 20 we have read today. It is the traditional reading about Thomas whom we call the doubter, and its primary message about faith and doubt is valid, though we have misread Thomas’ part in this. He does not require anything for faith that the other disciples do not require. They do not believe Christ has risen until they see him in person. Thomas just isn’t present the first time the resurrected Christ appears. But as soon as he sees Jesus, like the others, he believes. In fact, he makes the highest confession found in the canonical Gospels, saying to Jesus, “My Lord and my God!”

There is much in this straightforward reading to enrich our understanding, as there is in Jesus speaking a word of peace, breathing the Holy Spirit onto his disciples, and empowering them for the ministry of forgiveness. But in the Easter 2024 issue of *Journal for Preachers* homiletics professor Tom Long tells the story of an experience Czech Catholic priest Tomas Halik had on this very Sunday of the Christian year which opens up a new level of meaning (pp. 11-12).

Halik attended worship at Madras Cathedral, heard the traditional reading from John 20, and assumed it meant what it always had. Jesus was offering his wounds to Thomas as evidence so that he might believe in him. But then, a priest friend took Tomas to the place where, according to legend, the Apostle Thomas was martyred, and then to an orphanage. Halik thought he had seen suffering. He had visited the sites of Nazi concentration camps, Hiroshima, and Ground Zero in New York, but nothing prepared him for what he saw that day. He writes:

In cots that were more like poultry pens lay small, abandoned children, their stomachs swollen with hunger, tiny skeletons covered in black, often inflamed, skin. In the seemingly endless

corridors their feverish eyes stared out at me from everywhere, and they stretched their pink-palmed hands out to me. In the unbreathable air, with all that stench and weeping, I felt a mental, physical, and moral nausea. I had the suffocating sense of helplessness and bitter shame that one feels when confronted with the poor and wretched, shame at having healthy skin, a full stomach, and roof over my head. I wanted cowardly to run away as fast as I could...to close my eyes and heart and to forget... (Tomas Halik, *Touch the Wounds: On Suffering, Trust, and Transformation*, 2023, p. 7)

Suddenly, Halik says, Jesus spoke to him, saying, “Touch my wounds! Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side.” He heard the Risen Christ’s words anew, not waving away the doubts of Thomas, but telling him that the wounds of human misery are Christ’s wounds. The Risen Christ can be found where there is pain and suffering, Halik says, if we ignore human need, we have no right to say with Thomas, “My Lord and my God.”

This interpretation does not do away with the traditional understanding, but it is compelling. Jesus does say he is present in the least of these in need – the hungry and thirsty, the stranger and those in need of clothing, the sick and imprisoned. Where else would the Risen Christ be present and at work? And what better meaning might we find for the resurrection than that we are raised to the kind of new life that cares about the suffering of this world?

The only question is as to how we might live in this way? Where and how do we touch Christ’s wounds? One place to start is with various kinds of ministry and mission work, whether on partnership trips to Honduras or Ukraine or Kenya, or right here through our own clothing ministry or food truck or other service opportunities. There is brokenness everywhere, and we cannot heal it all, it is not even our responsibility to do so. What we can do it is show up somewhere people are hurting, touch these wounds of Christ in some way. If we can offer practical help, great, but this is not the only way to make a difference.

In his book *The Philippian Fragment* Calvin Miller tells the story of letters written by a mythical figure in the early church who addresses concerns that seem quite current. In one chapter, the character, Eusebius, writes about Helen of Hierapolis (pp. 23-26). She is a faith healer, and he isn't often fond of these folks. One of them claimed that if people touched his sequined toga, they would be healed, but he lost his following when he couldn't get relief from his own toothache.

Helen is different. She doesn't seem to heal anyone. When she sees an amputee selling styluses, she touches his legs and cries, "Grow back! Grow back! In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, grow back!" When they don't, she sits down next to man for a very long time and sells styluses with him. When she gets up, she is almost too sore to move, but she assures the man that one day, perhaps in the resurrection, he will walk again. When he asks if she heals everyone this way, she says she would rather heal with promises than to promise healing.

Helen is on her way to her great crusade when she sees a young girl without arms. "Grow long! Grow long!" she says, "In the glorious name of Jesus Christ, grow long." The girl looks puzzled, nothing happens, and so Helen says, "I was afraid of that. Oh well, I can miss my meeting one night, I guess. Young lady, how long has been since anyone combed your hair?" She sits down and begins to comb her hair, and Eusebius says that for the first time, he wants to be a faith healer.

Sometimes we can touch the wounds of Christ in practical ways – by providing food and clothing, welcoming immigrants and refugees, working on Habitat houses, empowering people through programs like Step-Up Ministry. Other times it may seem like there is nothing we can do, but there is. We can always take notice, we can always listen, we can always care. We cannot heal every wound, but we can touch the wounds we see, realizing they are the wounds of Christ.

Another place to touch Christ's wounds is among people we know and love, those in need in our own church family, the sick and grieving, the homebound and broken, anyone and everyone who is hurting. We are called to reach out to the needs of the whole world, but not at the expense of those closest to us.

Most of us will know the name of civil rights activist and North Carolina pastor William Barber II, some of us know William personally. Gary Dorrien's article "Born to Struggle: William J. Barber II in the Shadow of MLK" documents some of the background that shaped Barber's ministry (*Commonweal* 150/9, October 2023).

His father was a physics teacher and a preacher, and he had an influence on him, but William idolized his grandmother. Every Sunday after church, she went to visit someone who was sick or suffering. "We'll be back shortly," she would tell the family, "We've got to go and hope somebody?" Barber thought she intended to say "help" but eventually realized she said what she meant. She was offering hope to people who were hurting simply with her presence, she was bearing witness to the Lord whose wounds are still seen and to the Easter world that has overcome all hatred and oppression, all suffering and pain.

What I would underscore in this story is not just the example of visiting sisters and brothers in need in the church, but who does this visiting – here not a minister but a faithful church member who cares about others. All of us are called to touch these wounds of Christ, and when all of us are involved, we can address more needs. It may be good business to think of staff doing this ministry, but it is horrible church, and it denies the majority of the faithful the privilege of service. We are all called to touch the wounds of those we know and love.

And I would add that we encounter many wounds in the natural flow of life. We are surrounded by people who are exhausted and hurting. They may appear sad, they may seem angry; they may ask for help, they may adamantly refuse help. But in a time of fear and hostility, hatred and division, a time when the pace of change and life itself is out of control, people are hurting. The least we can do is notice and care. Touching the wounds of Christ may involve dramatic acts of service, some carefully planned ministry, but it may just mean extending grace to the cashier who is having a bad day, allowing the co-worker to blow off steam, offering a smile to a stranger who looks ready to give up on life.

"Touch my wounds!" Jesus says, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side." This is our calling.