

“The Risen Christ of Scars”

John 20:19-31

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Two months ago, Christian churches all over the world celebrated Ash Wednesday to mark the beginning of Lent- a time for fasting and prayer, a time for reflection on the person of Christ and his self-surrender to that cross. Throughout the next forty days, we were encouraged to undertake a serious examination of our hearts and minds and engage in a season of repentance which hopefully would lead to spiritual renewal in our lives. But as the writer of Ecclesiastes says, there’s a time and a season for EVERYTHING- a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn as well as a time to dance. If that’s the CASE, then during this post-Easter period, it is now time for us to remove our mourning clothes and put on our dancing shoes, that is, to cast off our “sackcloth and ashes” and don our new wedding outfits for Christ is now RISEN; the bridegroom has at last come!

For the past two months, that’s eight straight weeks, we’ve heard about nothing but Jesus going to Jerusalem to die. And when he DOES get there, we find ourselves horrified by what we find happens to him: he is abandoned by his friends, suffers through a mock trial, is beaten within an inch of his life, gets nailed to a cross where we hear him cry out to his Heavenly Father (who may or may NOT be there for him), until he eventually gives up the ghost. By now, you’ve got to feel a bit shell shocked by it all, perhaps even tired of hearing about it again and again. Some of you are probably murmuring, “Dave, let’s now move on from that cross. Let’s try keeping the messages a little lighter from now on. Perhaps we can hear some sermons on the parables or Jesus’ fondness for little children or how he’s the Good Shepherd who cares for his sheep. But as for that bloody cross and his cries of forsakenness, let’s just pack it up and store it away until NEXT LENT, the way we do with Advent and all those Christmas lessons once December 25<sup>th</sup> has passed.”

Many Christians DO feel that way, in fact, there are even those who would like to dispense with the cross and any reference to Christ’s blood ALTOGETHER. I have a close friend who years ago preached every Sunday evening at a fashionable retirement home in California. He had an organist there who was quite an accomplished musician. But when he wanted her to play a familiar hymn or gospel song which contained an allusion to Jesus’ blood or his death on a cross, she’d adamantly refuse. She told him she couldn’t because she found them to be offensive- they were much too brutal, too barbaric for her senses. She would only play those hymns which she found to be positive and uplifting, songs that left one feeling good by the end of the service. Eventually my friend found the whole situation impossible and quit. He had enough theology to know that the cross is the centerpiece of the gospel, that if you eliminate it and the blood that was shed upon it, then you’d have no “gospel,” no “good news” to speak of!

Have you ever wondered why Jesus in his post-resurrection appearances, in what is now his glorified state, still retains the wounds and scars that led to his death in the first place? He who had just emerged triumphant over the forces of sin and death appears to his followers with his temples still stained red from the crown of thorns that was pressed into them, and his wrists, his side and his feet continue to display the bloody holes where nails and a spear had been driven straight through them. After all, having conquered death once and for all, who needs to be

reminded of that tear-stained cross and all the pain and savagery that was a part of it. Yet Jesus encounters his followers in the most INGLORIOUS WAY IMAGINABLE- by baring his still open and bloody wounds for all to see.

Now the scriptures leave no doubt that the wounds he bore were real and he had no hesitation in showing them off to his disciples that Easter evening. When he suddenly materialized before them in the Upper Room, those gashes became his calling card, proving to them it was indeed their leader now returned from the dead. Then one week later and in the same room, he returns AGAIN- THIS time for the benefit of ONE disciple- Thomas, who had been absent during his first appearance there. When Thomas was informed of what he had missed, he responded by swearing he WOULD NEVER believe unless he first had solid proof that it was him. That meant not only SEEING the nail prints in his hands, but PUTTING his fingers into them and INSERTING them into his side- only THEN would he believe. When Jesus appears before him, he displays his hands and his feet to Thomas, even imploring him to touch them if that will help. But he never has to. The fact that Jesus cared enough to relieve his doubts and allay his concerns was ENOUGH to melt his heart. Falling down before him, he humbly declares, “My Lord and my God!” Luke in his gospel also records the account of the disciples’ initial encounter with Jesus in the Upper Room but with this slight difference. When Jesus appeared in their midst, they were frightened and thought they had seen a spirit (Luke24:37-40). It was only after he revealed his scars to them did they believe it was him.

But that STILL doesn’t answer the question, “Why does Jesus continue to bear the ugly signs of his execution even after he’s left his tomb?” Peter Wehner, a former speech writer and Presidential adviser who is also a Christian of deep faith, asked that SAME question in a recent *New York Times* article: “Why Is Jesus Still Wounded After His Resurrection?” “After all, scars,” he says, “are signs of imperfection, a defacement, something most of us try to hide- and in the case of Jesus, they were reminders of searing pain, vulnerability and indignity.” He then surveys a number of theologians and church leaders to get THEIR take on it. Some say that it’s not just that his scars allowed his disciples to identify him as their leader back from the dead, but that it serves as a witness for all to see that he truly DOES identify with humanity in all its fullness, that he not only understands the weariness and hunger and thirst we go through, but he knows intimately the pain of rejection and torture and even death itself. Because of HIS wounds, we can now be certain that Jesus has deep and sincere empathy FOR US in our OWN wounds.

At our Maundy Thursday service, I spoke of how the gods of the Greeks and Romans would leave the lofty heights of Mt. Olympus looking like ordinary mortals to walk among us and cause all kinds of mischief or good fortune. But when the situation became too difficult for them, they would tire of it all, throw off the disguise, and return once again to the safety and security of Mt. Olympus. For THEIR gods, it was all good clean fun- but that was not “the Word becoming flesh.” Those gods were not really human, but only LOOKED that way. They did not undergo any real limitations, but simply DISGUISED themselves. They did not subject themselves to the trials and tribulation of our human condition.

Moreover, there were two prominent heresies in the ancient world—Gnosticism and Docetism—and both professed that Jesus never entered it as a flesh and blood person much less died a real physical death on the cross, that he wasn’t a real person as you and I are. Those who held to this view believed the flesh was evil and could NEVER be holy, that only SPIRIT was capable of the divine. They said Jesus didn’t REALLY die- he only APPEARED to.

But Jesus destroys these arguments on BOTH counts. The scriptures tell us that he willingly went to his death like a lamb to the slaughter. He chose to suffer because by DOING so, he would then show once and for all how he could identify with us in our OWN sufferings, REGARDLESS of what or how extreme they might be. His death would be slow, intense, and AGONIZINGLY painful but in this way, no one would ever be able to deny his full humanity. Thus, as he understood LIFE in all its fullness, he now showed that he understood death--OUR DEATH—in the extreme as WELL. There was no part of life that Jesus was NOT intimately acquainted with. To quote Hebrews, “For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” A God without blood on his shirt and sweat on his hands and tears on his cheeks is not any kind of a God that could speak to US in the middle of OUR distress.

For a half century now, Jurgen Moltmann has remained one of the Church’s leading theologians. During World War II, he served in the German army and when the war ended, he was captured and transferred to a prisoner-of-war camp in Belgium. The German Reich had collapsed, German civilization had been destroyed, and the nation along with much of Europe lay in ruins. He personally felt abandoned by God and his fellow human beings, and with much of the hopes of his youth now gone, he couldn’t see any future ahead for himself. It was then that an American chaplain gave him a Bible and he began to read it, beginning with the psalms of lament in the Old Testament: “I have fallen dumb and have to eat up my suffering within myself...I am a stranger as all my fathers were”(from Psalm 39).

But then in his reading, he came to Christ’s Passion and when he heard his death cry from the cross, “My God, why have you forsaken me?” he knew that there WAS someone who understood him, one who stood beside him when he had NOTHING and everyone else had ABANDONED him. You see, that was HIS cry for God TOO. He began to understand who this suffering and God-forsaken Jesus was because only a SUFFERING AND REJECTED Lord could ever understand HIM. He grasped that this Jesus is the divine brother in our distress, that he brings hope to the prisoners and to the abandoned. He is the one who delivers us from the guilt that weighs us down and robs us of every kind of future. He said of this experience:

“I became possessed by a hope when in human terms there was little enough to hope for. I summoned up the courage to live, at a point when one would perhaps willingly have put an end to it all. This early companionship with Jesus, the brother in suffering and the liberator from guilt, has never left me since. The Christ for me is the crucified Jesus.”

The popular Christian writer and theologian John Stott made it clear in his classic work *The Cross of Christ* how he could never have believed in God if it were not for that cross:

“In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was IMMUNE to it? I have entered many Buddhist temples in different Asian countries and stood respectfully before the statue of the Buddha, his legs crossed, arm folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time after a while I have had to turn away. And in imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. THAT is the God FOR ME! He laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us. Our sufferings become more manageable in the light of his. There is still a question mark against human suffering, but over it

we boldly stamp another mark, the cross which symbolizes divine suffering.”

Well I think we’ve firmly established that through the life and death of God’s son, we see divine love displayed through his identification with us in every way and to the nth degree. God understands our fears and motivations, and promises to stand beside us through every testing and trial life may hand us. But WHY is such divine empathy so important and how does that HELP us? Returning to Wehner, he quotes Peggy Wehmeyer, a former religion correspondent for ABC News, how it was the knowledge that Jesus feels our OWN pain that enabled HER to deal with the suicide of her husband back in 2008. She said, “If Jesus showed us his scars, even after his resurrection, then maybe WE can learn to integrate pain and suffering into OUR lives in a way that frees US from wasting energy spent in denial and shame.” In other words, instead of trying to deny or rid or insulate ourselves against pain and suffering, we are better served by admitting how they are an important part of life and that we can best deal with them when we recognize how Jesus bears wounds just like our own. And when you add the promise of his personal presence and commitment of support to us through his Holy Spirit, we are then MORE than equipped to deal with any problem or difficulty that may come our way.

Simon Steer is the chaplain at Abigdon School in Abingdon, England, and he shared with Wehner how the “risen Jesus of scars” helps him to deal with the depression he has been afflicted with his entire life. He said that Christ is with him in the dark night of the soul. That Jesus himself experienced a ‘dark night of the soul’ in the Garden of Gethsemane, where we’re told his soul was ‘deeply grieved,’ and especially as he hung on the cross, naked, beaten and left to die, feeling forsaken by God,’ it is that which gives him all the strength in the world to endure the pangs of despair and melancholy that have repeatedly returned. The fact is that God doesn’t always remove the burdens from off our back but instead gives us a stronger back with which to bear them- and it is his perpetual love and presence and understanding that does JUST THAT.

And so the scars of Christ become the greatest emblems of his undying love for us and the means by which we find healing in our own. The Latin word “vulnerable” comes from “vulnus” which means “wound,” and by allowing himself to become vulnerable by exposing those nail prints and the gash of that spear for everyone to see, his weakness thus becomes our strength. St. Augustine speculated that we shall see in the bodies of martyrs the traces of the wounds they bore for Christ’s name “because it will not be a deformity but a dignity in them; and a certain kind of beauty will shine in them.”

In the aftermath of the Holocaust, it is common to hear the refrain oft-repeated by Jews “Never forget! Never forget!” Similarly, in the aftermath of Golgotha, “the risen Christ of scars” reminds us the VERY SAME, how WE must “NEVER FORGET” how EVERYONE carries deep wounds and large scars, many of which we deliberately keep hidden out of pride or shame or embarrassment when they’re actually a basic part of the human condition. We must NEVER FORGET that even GOD has scars- from wounds inflicted by his own creation when he sent his only-begotten son to save us from ourselves. As Phillip Yancey has written, a Christian author who has thought long and hard on the connection between grace and our “woundedness”:  
“He could have had a perfect body, or no body, when he returned to splendor in heaven. Instead he kept a remembrance of his visit to earth, and for a keepsake of his time here, he chose scars. The pain of humanity became the pain of God.”

And we must NEVER FORGET that where Christ’s wounds and scars were meant to help heal

OURS, HIS scars will NEVER heal. He will bear them for all eternity to serve as a witness and constant reminder of the true cost of love, the price he paid on our behalf.

But I have one FINAL thought to leave with you. Because Jesus retains and reveals his scars for all the world to see, this is of great significance for us, his followers. For just as his open wounds and exposed scars can become a source of healing for OUR pain and sufferings, so can our OWN wounds and scars become a source of healing TO OTHERS. Not only does it help establish a special bond or solidarity between US, freeing us to openly and honestly share our wounds with one another, but it can also create an opening for us to point them to CHRIST and HIS wounds, thus allowing for the possibility of a relationship to open up between THEM AS WELL. Said Scott Dudley, the Senior Pastor of the Bellevue Presbyterian Church in Bellevue, Washington, “When I’m counseling, often the most helpful thing I bring is my wounds.” He added, “Everything important about being a pastor I did not learn in seminary but through the pain of a personal loss that will never completely fade.” He contends that “wounded people make the best healers because they know what it means to be wounded. I’m a better healer not in spite of my wounds, but BECAUSE of my wounds.”

Let me close by saying that just before Lent, I received a small devotional in the mail to help guide one on his or her OWN Lenten journey during the weeks leading up to Easter. It is called “The Wondrous Cross: Reflections on Christ’s Sacrifice Drawn from the Songs and Hymns of Easter.” Reading through it, I was inspired by one particular piece which was based on Issac Watts’ famous hymn “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” first published in 1707. Unlike the organist at the retirement home who I spoke about at the beginning of my sermon, the author of this reflection--a pastor from the San Francisco Bay area—was convinced that it was the CROSS covered with Christ’s own blood rather than his RESURRECTION and the empty tomb which revealed God’s glory the most. God used two pieces of wood to expose all the emptiness and ephemerality offered by this world when they are compared to the surpassing love of the one who was nailed to it. In his meditation, he wrote:

“As our gaze begins to shift away from the deceptive gloss of earthly pleasures and toward the wondrous cross of Christ, and we see ‘sorrow and love flow mingled down,’ we are faced with the question, ‘Did e’er such love and sorrow meet, or thorns compose so rich a crown?’ And eventually, we’re compelled toward the reality that a ‘love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.’”

Or might I suggest the lyrics of ANOTHER well-known hymn “Crown Him with Many Crowns” for it TOO speaks of that cross and how in the wounds of Christ who was suspended from it, one can behold the highest and noblest example of love the world has ever seen:

*Crown him the Lord of love:  
Behold his hands and side,  
Rich wounds yet visible above,  
In beauty glorified:  
No angel in the sky  
Can fully bear that sight,  
But downward bends his burning eye  
At mysteries so bright.*

Amen and amen...