



“SEE MY SCARS”

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John 20:19-30

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When we proclaim the Easter salutation, “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!” how many of us really believe this? Have you truly been touched by the risen Christ? And how do you know if you have? How did Christ appear to you? And what did that meeting do for you? This Easter morning we shall examine the encounter which the disciples had with the risen Christ; how they knew it was truly Christ and not some apparition or deluded dream; and finally, how that encounter changed them forever.

Our text is John 20:19-30. This incident probably took place in the home of Mary, the mother of Mark, where the disciples celebrated their last Passover meal with Jesus.

When therefore it was evening, on that day, the first day of the week, and when the doors were locked where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst, and said to them, “Peace be with you.” And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. The disciples therefore rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus therefore said to them again, “Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained.” (20:19-23, NASB)

An Uninvited Break-in

The disciples are cowering like frightened sheep in a secluded room in Jerusalem. They are completely inaccessible, barricaded behind bolted doors, in fear of their lives. Their leader had been killed. What was to become of them? It had been a very dark Friday and Saturday, a weekend of shattered dreams, silent screams, pain, isolation, and pathos.

But in the evening, the time of revelation, the risen Lord breaks in and stands in their midst. He doesn't knock or ask permission to enter. He just breaks in and announces, “Peace to you.” This was the conventional greeting, representing the Hebrew, “*Shalom 'aleykem*” (Peace to you).

But the fact that Jesus has repeated this greeting (remember he had said this, in the Upper Room, when he promised, “Peace I leave with you, not as the world gives...”) suggests there is more here than just an ordinary greeting. As Beasley-Murray writes: “Though a common word *shalom* was also the embracing term used to denote the unqualified well-being that would characterize the people of God once the eschatological kingdom had dawned, Jesus' ‘*Shalom!*’ on Easter evening is the complement to ‘it is finished’ on the cross, for the peace of recon-

ciliation and life from God is now imparted...Not surprisingly it is included, along with ‘grace,’ in the greeting of every epistle of Paul in the New Testament.”

So once again, Jesus announces peace to the frightened disciples. It is a peace that is larger than any of their petty fears, for the resurrection had ushered in the great, climactic moment of God's rule upon the earth. The cosmic battle was over and the good news of peace had come. Man's sin and guilt, which stood between him and God, had been removed.

Seeing Through the Wounds

To demonstrate his point, Jesus shows the disciples the wound marks on his hands and side. “When the Romans crucified someone, they either tied or nailed the victim to the cross. If the latter, they drove the nails through the wrists; the hands would not have supported the weight. But both the Hebrew word for hand (*yad*) and the Greek word (*cheir*) can include the wrist and forearm. Nails were commonly driven through the feet, one spike through both feet, one foot placed on top of the other” (D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* [IVP, 1991] 656). How ironic, that the perfect Man, the One who had entered heaven, was disfigured with permanent scars: scars in hands which, while he lived, served to extend his healing touch; and a gaping scar in his side, the flesh of which enveloped his holy heart. Yet it is these gaping wounds that caused the disciples to recognize Jesus.

When someone lets you into their life through their wounds, you get to know them at the deepest level. I led a men's retreat recently in another city, and the men wrote poems describing their pain. One man, a police detective in a homicide division, wrote poetic images of the imaginary safety of the corpses that he had been examining during the day. When he goes home at night, he said, he wants to taste the sweetness of his three children, but his mouth is filled with bitterness. One of the men told me that this group had been meeting for years, but in that hour and a half, when they shared their wounds, they had gotten to know each other better than ever before.

So it is with Jesus. When the disciples see the scars they are drawn to him and their sorrow is turned into joy. This is what continually draws us to the risen Christ...

*This one impaled by my spear
with wounds so deep,
yet draws me near.*

The Resurrection Touch: Purpose, Power and Authority

Once the disciples recognize Christ, he commissions them, saying, “As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” The crying need of the human soul is to have a purpose to live. Notice how the resurrection lifts the disciples out of the fear of isolation and bonds them to Christ, to the Father, and to the world. No longer will they wander aimlessly on the earth, like vagabonds. They are given a purpose. They become the sent ones, to continue the mission that Christ was sent to do.

People who have been touched by the resurrected Christ no longer are isolated. His resurrection binds and unifies the whole universe together. It is not some isolated incident that makes people other-worldly. Now, with a Man in heaven, our once fragmented lives begin to come back together again. So the resurrection forever reorients the life of the disciples to live for the purpose of offering the saving life of the risen Christ to the world. Christians “never have an excuse to rest on their laurels, or to define their task too narrowly” (Carson). “The apostles were commissioned to carry on Christ’s work, and not to begin a new one” (Westcott).

Once commissioned, the disciples are then anointed. In an act reminiscent of the garden of Eden, when God breathed into the man’s nostrils and man became a living being (the LXX in Gen. 2:7 uses the same verb), so now the risen Christ exhales in their presence and says, “*Receive the Holy Spirit.*” Here is the perfect Man in heaven, still scarred, still giving his life away as he did on earth. This act is not to be confused with Pentecost, when the reality of the Spirit came upon the disciples in full measure. Rather, Jesus’ action here is most likely an acted parable foreshadowing that event.

The resurrection had changed things forever. A new era had arrived. Everything Jesus visibly did *for* the disciples while he was on earth he will now do invisibly *in* them by means of the Holy Spirit. While they no longer possessed Christ in the flesh, they would inherit his very life to live inside them. And once endowed with that gift of life, they would become bearers of that life-saving work that Jesus carried out while he was upon the earth.

Having encountered the resurrected Christ, three things happened to the disciples: first, they were commissioned with a purpose; second, they were infused with life—Christ’s very Spirit living inside them; and third, they were granted authority to act in his name: “If you forgive the sins of any, {their sins} have been forgiven them; if you retain the {sins} of any, they have been retained.” The reception of the Spirit is linked with the forgiveness of sins. But “though this sounds stern and harsh, it is simply the result of the preaching of the gospel, which either brings men to repent as they hear of the ready and costly forgiveness of God, or leaves them unresponsive to the offer of forgiveness which is the gospel, and so they are left in their sins” (Marsh).

It is important also to observe that the verb is in the passive voice, implying that it is God, not the disciples, who would do this. Working through the disciples, the Holy

Spirit, like Jesus before him, would continue to divide humanity into two groups: those who believe and those who refuse forgiveness. The Spirit who cleanses men and women and makes them holy, also gives them the power to pass that new life on to others. Paul describes people who are in this ministry as “servants of the new covenant” (2 Cor. 3:6). So three things happened to the disciples the moment they were touched by the risen Christ: they were given purpose, power, and authority.

And so the story lives on in our lives today. The risen Christ breaks in upon us, finds us locked up in isolation, walled in to our fears, and draws us to a heavenly peace through his wounds. This draws us to him and integrates us to God, to one another, and to the world, with purpose and life. And so the story goes on...

But, alas, on that first Easter, one apostle was missing. Verse 24:

The Supreme Skeptic

But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore were saying to him, “We have seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “Unless I shall see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will never believe.” (20:24-25)

When Jesus first appeared to them, Thomas was missing. Now, when at last Thomas is among them, the disciples enthusiastically relate to him the story of the risen Christ. But he refuses to believe the testimony of what they had seen and heard. In fact, he says emphatically that unless he not only sees but touches those wounds, he will never believe. The verb is quite graphic: “Unless I *thrust* my finger and my hand into the place of those wounds, I will never believe!”

The Lord graciously condescends. A week later, on the following Sunday, we have this account. Verse 26:

The Sublime Confession

And after eight days again His disciples were inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors having been locked, and stood in their midst, and said, “Peace be with you.” Then He said to Thomas, “Reach here your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand, and put it into My side; and be not unbelieving, but believing.” Thomas answered and said to Him, “My Lord and my God!” (20:26-28)

Once more it is the first day of the week (in the Jewish rendering of eight days). The disciples are in the same place, behind locked doors, with presumably the same feelings, governed by the same fear. Again the risen Christ suddenly appears. Without warning he breaks in upon them and stands in their midst. And he utters the same greeting, “*Shalom ‘aleykem* (Peace be with you).” This whole encounter is for the sake of one man, Thomas, who was encased in unbelief. Instead of merely being invited to “see his scars,” Thomas is invited to touch Jesus’ hands and side: “Go ahead, touch. Feel the depth of my wounds

if that will shake you out of your unbelief! Become a believer!"

So captured is Thomas in holy awe that he has no need to touch or feel. The mere sight of Jesus' wounds transforms him from an unbeliever to a believer. Following a mere glance at those gaping wounds he makes the highest theological confession of Jesus that is found in the New Testament: "*My Lord and my God.*" Thomas attributes to the risen Jesus the title "Lord," which is used in the Old Testament for the personal name of Israel's covenant God, YHWH. While it is possible that what he said can also be rendered merely as "sir" in Greek, lest there be any confusion as to his meaning, Thomas adds the words, "my God," thus investing the title with full divinity. D. A. Carson writes: "Thomas' confession is the climactic expression of what it means to honor the Son as the Father is honored (John 5:23). It is the crowning display of how human faith has come to recognize the truth set out in the prologue, 'The Word was God...and the Word became flesh'" (Carson, *John*, 659). How ironic, that Thomas, the supreme skeptic, is the one who makes the supreme confession.

Isn't it amazing that it is through the wounds of the risen Christ that we perceive his deity, and we are overcome with holy awe? What a mystery! But this is exactly what Jesus predicted, in John 8:28, "When you lift up the son of Man, then you will realize that I AM (i.e. the Old Testament name, Yahweh)." As I walk alongside those who are suffering I am always astonished that it is during those fiery times that the precious, holy presence of Jesus is most dear to them.

The Final Beatitude

Jesus concludes with a beatitude. Verse 29:

Jesus said to him, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed."

From now on, following this transition period of resurrection appearances, people everywhere would have to believe without seeing. Their belief would be based not on what they saw, but on what they heard—the testimony of the apostles. Ironically, Jesus proclaims that this state is more blessed than that of the one who saw and believed. Why is that? One rabbi put it this way: "The proselyte is dearer to God than all the Israelites who stood by Mount Sinai. For if all the Israelites had not seen the thunder and the flames and the lightnings and the quaking mountains and the sound of the trumpet they would not have accepted the law and taken upon themselves the kingdom of God. Yet this man who has seen none of all these things yet comes and gives himself to God and takes on himself the yoke of the kingdom of God. Is there any who is dearer than this man?" (Rabbi Simeon ben Laqish, c. AD 250).

I think that is true. But it is also more blessed, because the intimacy with Christ is greater. The resurrection opens up the possibility of God's Spirit now dwelling in full measure within us. Thus the presence of Christ will be

more intense through word and Spirit, than his actual presence was while he was with the disciples. As Peter writes in his epistle, "Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls" (1 Peter 1:8-9).

Thomas was actually set up to be the model for all of us, but he refused, and Christ condescended to him. But, my friends, more blessed are you than Thomas: to be drawn to the risen Christ through his wounds, and then to be bound to God and to the world with a life-saving purpose. And, as you open up your wounds to the world, you will draw all manner of men and women to the Savior.

Have you been touched by the risen Christ? Have you been drawn to heaven's throne through his wounds? Have you heard that soft timbre of his voice saying, "*Peace be with you,*" severing your fears? And in the midst of your wounds have you felt the blazing touch of deity light a flame in your heart? Have you felt the privileged call to go into the world to draw all men to him? That is what it means to have been touched by the risen Christ.

Shortly after the butchery of the First World War, Edward Shillito captured these thoughts in his poem, *Jesus of the Scars*:

If we have never sought, we seek Thee now:
Thine eyes burn through the dark, our only stars;
We must have sight of thorn-pricks on Thy brow,
We must have Thee, O Jesus of the Scars.

The heavens frighten us; they are too calm;
In all the universe we have no place.
Our wounds are hurting us; where is the balm?
Lord Jesus, by Thy Scars, we claim Thy grace.

If, when the doors are shut, Thou drawest near,
Only reveal those hands, that side of Thine;
We know to-day what wounds are, have no fear,
Show us Thy Scars, we know the countersign.

The other gods were strong; but Thou wast weak;
They rode, but Thou didst stumble to a throne;
But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak,
And not a god has wounds, but Thou alone.

Now may the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord, equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever (Hebrews 13:20-21).

Amen.

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