

The scars that make us real

John 20:19-29; 1 Peter 1:3-9

Rev Jean Shannon

There's a reason they call this "low" Sunday – the first Sunday after Easter. Who knew there WAS a Sunday after Easter. Easter always feels like the finishing line in a marathon. Bam! We all fall down. What else can I say?

Well, actually, the next few weeks gives us an opportunity to explore the various dimensions of the resurrection and the implications for the human community. Jesus appears and touches people in different ways until he is confident that the fire is lit and the movement is on its way.

You know I love the Thomas story but I have preached on it so many times, I am in danger of repeating myself. Oh yes, many of us can relate to Thomas as an experiential learner. That is, he doesn't take in abstract ideas but rather needs to personally touch and feel them. We all know people like that. When Mary brought the news that Jesus body was gone – Peter had to go and look for himself.

So today, rather than look at Thomas, I want to look at the rest of the text.

The disciples were together behind locked doors – and Jesus appears. That is, locked doors are no impediment...which is a great metaphor, don't you think?

Many times, in many stories, even the hard-hearted have had their eyes opened and their lives changed by interactions with Jesus or a disciple. And the fact that the doors are locked because they are afraid – is even a greater allegory. Most people with closed minds or closed hearts ARE afraid. That's the point. We throw up all these self-defences to keep people and feelings out!

It is doubt that makes us afraid and quite frankly, doubt and fear are two essential, life-saving talents for the human race. They are hard-wired in for our survival. Part of the design, you might say. But, like all human traits, it is in the degrees and management that we find spiritual and physical health. After all, our bodies tell us when we are hungry because the body needs fuel – but then, especially at Easter, we may be guilty of more than a little excess.

You could say, the trifecta is fear, doubt and shame but then shame is just fear, really. We hide things because we are afraid that we will no longer be loved or admired because of whatever it is.

The disciples might have been cowering behind the locked door, not only because they feared they might suffer the same fate but also shame – in the fear of how will

they face the followers of Jesus after what just happened. Was God dead? How can they explain this?

So, number one, Jesus sees no barrier and steps right in.

Number two – he showed them his hands and side. He was not embarrassed or ashamed. He didn't hide his scars.

Nadia Boltz-Webber said she found it comforting that the resurrection did not erase the marks of having lived a real life and endured a real death. He said, "peace be with you" and then he showed them his injuries.

There's a vulnerability and honesty that is breath-taking.

We hide our scars but scars never leave. Our deep injuries leak out in decisions we make and prejudices we keep...and most often, in our closed minds. It is not just about being victims, it's loss. No matter how long you live, we will remain the motherless child or ½ of a passionate couple not single; or the sibling who survived ... or whatever. Nothing takes it away, only hides it. But our hiding places have no walls. Remember Jesus looked inside the woman at the well and said, you are right, you have no husband... "You've had 5 husbands".

You've heard me say before, a good chaplain is a wounded healer. They have been to the pits themselves and they understand how dark it can be. Nadia says, she can be inspired by other people's virtues and accomplishments, but she feels less alone with someone who shares their failures with her.¹

We hide our scars – the evidence of wounds – because we are afraid that we won't be beautiful in someone's eyes. When we are falling in love – we keep them hidden. As trust builds, sometimes we begin to tell the stories and each story brings us closer together. Now I'm not saying we should go around broadcasting our wounds. I am just in awe that Jesus was not compelled in any way to appear less than wounded. He was not embarrassed to be disfigured. His body told the story.

We doubt the other person. We fear their response. What I'm saying is sometimes, when the time is right – we need to have the courage to reveal ourselves: to be bold, vulnerable and unashamed.

Then Jesus, after greeting them and showing his wounds – what did He do? He breathed on them – the breath of God – and told them that they had to forgive, or they would not be forgiven. There he was, all messed up and he refused to condemn

¹ Resurrection is messy, Nadia Boltz-Webber, the corners 9 April 23

the men who tortured him. The Disciples were not allowed to live in bitterness or to form a church on that, no way!

In that breath – the church was born. It reminds us that the church's foundation is Jesus. That despite all our volunteerism, rules and structures, we are not like other social groups. The church has a divine origin and its reason for being is not apparent in successes or failures, in growth or influence, in numbers but in the call and commission of Christ.² Bold, vulnerable and unashamed.

Now, let's talk about doubt. Once again, Jesus appears through the locked doors and stood among them. He invites Thomas to put his finger INTO his side. Unlike the God of the Old Testament, you do not have to look away – this is a God unafraid to touch and be touched. This is a God you can name. There something very grounded in that. There is a closer connection.

It seems we could do with a good dose of doubt. The new pandemic is conspiracy theories and misinformation and somewhere along the line we've lost the filter that says, "really?!"³ We no longer do our own fact-checking and we distrust people who do it for us.

Doubt is healthy.

The growth of conspiracy theories and misinformation has Scientists worried. The University of Cork review found that "traditional fact-checking and counterarguments are the least effective means of combating conspiracy beliefs". So, what they have been doing is teaching 'doubt'. Well, not teaching, inoculating against untested certainty. Prevention is a far more potent treatment for tackling bull dust than duelling 'alternative truths'.

The review found that every study that trialled "fact-based inoculation" – a kind of information vaccine where people are primed to spot misinformation before they are exposed to it – significantly reduced conspiratorial thinking in the people who took part⁴. No kidding.

"With inoculation theory, psychologists have found that if you expose people to a weakened version of misinformation, that builds up their cognitive immunity – so that when they encounter actual misinformation, they're less likely to get misled."⁵

² Brueggemann, Cousar et al, *Texts for preaching* Year A, p.272

³ Note incredulous voice!

⁴ Angus Dalton, SMH article "Meet the cranky uncle vaccinating people against conspiracies" 12/4/23 11:58

⁵ IBID

(They've even developed an App!)⁶

Finally, we come to the last statement in today's text – Blessed are those who believe who have not seen. This is a prophetic statement to a church that would live in the future. How will generations far removed from the events of Pilot's day be able to experience and understand? How do we ask them to hold on and be brave and vulnerable? This statement is not a slight against Thomas but a blessing for future generations.

The disciples were commissioned to go out and TEACH. A definition for teaching is the process of attending to people's needs, experiences and feelings, and intervening so that they learn particular things, and go beyond the given. In other words, not to indoctrinate but to change them with information and within the process.

The disciples were not asked to collect naïve followers but to create an informed faith.

The church that Jesus breathed into onto life that day was bold and capable of penetrating the emotional barriers humans create. It was real and personal and accommodated a healthy dose of doubt and held an invitation and blessing for those not yet born – for those whose experience would be through other means.

So I pray:

Humble God, not angry, give me the courage to dress my wounds and be not afraid to show life's scars; let me bleed with others as needed and dose me with enough doubt to seek you in all ways. Amen

⁶ Apple store – Cranky Uncle – a game to inoculate against mis-information