

Easter 2 B. April 8, 2018. John 20: something, to the end.

There's something strange about this gospel story, and I don't mean Thomas' doubt. If you've ever been in an Episcopal church on this Sunday in the church's year, then I assume that you have heard Thomas' doubt vigorously defended and perhaps even lionized. Given my long friendship with doubt, I don't object to this at all, but this is not that sermon. No, I mean something else that's strange. Our reading begins on Easter Sunday, which means that it's only a few hours since the first apostle, Mary Magdalene, encountered the risen Jesus and ran back to tell the boys. Their response is a bit underwhelming, as we find them here hiding in fear.

On that fear, I have to point out that every character in this passage, including Jesus and even the author, is Jewish. When in Christian history the gospel of John has been used by Christians to portray Jews as a threat, that reading has nothing to do with the gospel and depends on ignoring the most basic facts of the story. When John says here "the Jews," we should think of the Jerusalem authorities who had just goaded the Roman Empire into killing Jesus.

So here they are, having heard from Mary the evangelist that Christ is risen but hiding in fear. And suddenly he appears among them, offering them peace. They rejoice, he breathes on them the Holy Spirit, and sends them out to continue his mission. So much is the foundation of the church's mission and identity, but I've left out the strange part: the first thing Jesus does after wishing them peace is to show them his wounds. He repeats the trick a week later with Thomas, but there Thomas has demanded it. Here, no one has asked to see the wounds and surely they weren't needed as proof of identification. So what's going on? Why at the most triumphant and joyous part of the gospel are wounds so central?

I don't think it's accidental that this great sending forth of the disciples comes from a Messiah who is both resurrected and wounded, both immortal and vulnerable. I don't think it's accidental that the church's triumph includes a reminder of weakness. There is something about authentic Christianity that does not hide woundedness; that willingly displays vulnerability.

This is profoundly counter-cultural. We are taught to put on a brave front, to show confidence at all times. We are expected to pretend to be prosperous, to flaunt our competence and self-sufficiency. Or at the very least, we have to pretend to be "okay." Bravado is treated as a virtue and our culture's cardinal sin is to ask for help. And it is into this world that our risen Savior walks with wounded hands outstretched.

The great Christian secret is that the greatest strength is manifest in weakness, that the wisdom of God is foolishness to the world, that the only way to gain true life is to give your life away, that the only power really worth having is rooted in vulnerability.

Our wounds are the places where we are imperfect. They are the places where we have been hurt. The places where we are not strong, where we need help, where the healing is still ongoing. Our wounds are where we are most vulnerable.

Because our victory has gone through the pain and humiliation of the cross—because even the resurrected Lord is wounded—our common life is one of searing honesty. We can say to each other, “Here’s where I’m wounded, and how God is healing me. Here are my scars. Here are the places in my life that have died, and here’s how God is bringing me back to life.” There’s something deeply wrong with the old “Sunday-best” notion of church where it is the place where we most must be flawless. A Christianity that takes its cues from today’s gospel passage sets up the church as the place where we are most honest. Christianity then invites us to live free of the burden of maintaining a glittering façade and to get real about the ways we are hurting. And then we can get real about the ways that we are being healed.

But here’s the real kicker: this display of woundedness and vulnerability by Jesus happens at the same time as the commissioning of the disciples. Jesus says, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” These folks, our parents in the faith, are commanded to continue Jesus’ mission, and the command comes cloaked in vulnerability. I think this may mean that the so-called church militant doesn’t leave this searing honesty about the ways we are imperfect or hurting within these walls. In fact, I think it’s the case that our evangelism is inconceivable without vulnerability. We’re a far cry here from health and wealth prosperity nonsense or the church as country club. We’re talking about an evangelism that most simply says “here’s where we hurt; here’s where we’ve hurt others; here’s how God is healing and forgiving us. You can be healed and forgiven, too.”

The John chapter 20 church in the world is willing to be hurt because it is confident of being healed. It is willing to take risks because mistakes will be forgiven. It asks for help because it has already experienced grace. It doesn’t insist on putting a false best face forward, because the whole point is to invite people as they really are to have an encounter with God, among the mixed up wounded healing imperfect body of the faithful. I think the world is thirsting for this kind of holy honesty. And God calls us to offer it. Amen.