

“Seeing and Believing”

Sunday, April 11, 2010 – Second Sunday of Easter

John 20:19-31

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Do you ever think about the things that will be wonderful in heaven? I do. If I were making a list, I'd start, as you probably would, with the expectation of seeing those who have gone before me. And after that, my list looks something like this:

I'll be able to eat all the chocolate I want and never gain weight.

I'll have 20-20 vision without glasses for the first time since fourth grade.

I'll be able to do all the Zumba moves just the way my instructor at the Y does them.

My knees, ankles, and shoulders won't feel like they're encased in cement when I get up in the morning.

Now if you think about this list, you'll see that everything on it has some connection with the body. I am assuming that in the next life, we will have bodies. Why do I think so? When Jesus appeared to his followers after the resurrection, he had a body. As it was for Jesus, so it will be for us. So each week when we recite the Apostle's Creed, we say, I believe in the resurrection of the body. It is not just our disembodied spirits that will live on after our biological deaths.

We know from several of the Biblical accounts of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances that his followers didn't always recognize him at first when he appeared to them. I take this to mean that a resurrection body doesn't look exactly like an earthly body. That would make sense. In this life, we have bodies that gain weight when we consume too much chocolate, eyes that can't make out the big E at the top of the chart without glasses, and joints that sometimes feel like they are encased in concrete when we awake. My list assumes that in heaven, our bodies are going to be perfected. Our aches, pains, and physical limitations are not going to follow us into eternity, thanks be to God.

But in this morning's reading from the Gospel of John, Jesus makes a post-resurrection appearance to his followers in a body that is scarred and wounded. . Why? Surely God had the power to clean him up for the occasion. Please hold this question in your mind as we recall what led up to the events of this morning's reading.

It is the evening of Easter day. The women have been to the empty tomb and have told the others about it, but the good news of Jesus' resurrection just hasn't sunk in. His followers are convinced they've seen the end of everything—the end of Jesus, the end of their life together, the end of his love, the end of his promises of a new life and a new kingdom, the end of all their hopes and dreams. How could everything have gone so terribly wrong, so quickly? How could their beloved rabbi have died such a dreadful death? At first maybe the shock of it all numbed them, but then a horrible realization started to sink in—how they failed him at the end, falling asleep and running away and pretending they didn't know him. That's when their fears started to overwhelm them: fear that those who came for Jesus might come for them next. Fear that his fate was maybe what they really deserved.

So they did what people do when they are afraid, they hid. They locked themselves in and they locked the world out. That's where we find them this morning, a small, dispirited group, hiding behind locked doors, trembling with fear. And unless I miss my guess, the blame game was in full swing. How come you didn't...well, I didn't see you doing anything different...if only we realized...if only we'd known...the chorus of coulda, woulda, shoulda was deafening.

And then Jesus shows up, and he says "Peace be with you."

Peace be with you. They are the words of Easter faith. You are loved, you are forgiven, you are not alone. Unlock your doors, you have nothing to fear. He shows his wounded hands and side. His followers realize it really is their Lord; they rejoice. They go and tell Thomas. Thomas, bless his heart, is a concrete thinker, a rational man, not unlike many of us, and he wants some proof before he'll believe that Jesus is alive. So Jesus shows up again a week later, this time when Thomas is there.

"Peace be with you," he says. Those words again. And he shows his wounds, for the second time.

He is not just proving his identity. Jesus is telling his followers, and that's you and me, that he is a God who has been wounded, who has the scars to show for it. And why would he do that? Because the truth about you and me is that we all have nail marks on our hands and gaping wounds in our sides. And we need to know, O God, how we need to know, that Jesus, God with us, is God who knows what it is to be one of us.

Have you been betrayed by someone you loved and trusted? On the night of his arrest, Judas came to Jesus and kissed him on the cheek; betrayal masqueraded as love and affection. Have you been there?

Have you been let down by your closest friends? In the Garden of Gethsemene, Jesus made a simple request of those closest to him: stay awake, be by my side. Almost immediately, they were snoring.

Have you struggled to know what God's will for you really is? Have you ever been pretty sure you knew what God's will was, but it definitely wasn't something you wanted to do? Jesus cried out to God: My Father, if there is any way, get me out of this.

Have you ever felt completely alone? From the cross, Jesus cried out, My God, why have you abandoned me?

Perhaps you have different wounds. Maybe all the bad news in the world, the crime, the layoffs, the child abuse, the internet bullying, the senseless deaths, maybe it just feels to you, as it sometimes does to me, like one, huge, gaping wound. And maybe what you want to do most is lock all that away, somewhere hidden where no one else can see. But we know how it really is. When we hear about 25 good, hard working men killed in a methane gas explosion in a coal mine in West Virginia, when we see the faces of their wives and the children, something in us tears and bleeds. Sometimes when no one is looking, we weep. And if someone sees a tear slipping down a cheek and asks what's wrong, well, it must be the start of allergy season.

So it matters, doesn't it, that Jesus comes to us in a wounded body, a body like ours. It matters that he shows his wounds and invites us to touch. You see, there's no shame in being wounded. We don't have to get all fixed up for him to love us. We don't have to pretend our wounds aren't there or that they don't hurt. This morning Jesus comes among us and says: Peace be with you. See my wounds? They hurt just like yours. You don't have to cover yours up. It's OK; you are my beloved ones, wounds and all.

Jesus shows his wounds because we need to see them in order to believe. Otherwise, it's too easy to say "I believe" –in a Jesus who lived long ago, a good man who taught us to be nice to each other, a sanitized, cleaned up Jesus who has gone off to live in a place where skin and bones no longer break and bleed. Trouble is, that Jesus doesn't have much to do with the real lives we lead. When we're in the middle of something awful, that's when we need a Jesus who knows what awful is and how it feels. That's when we see who he really is. Thomas said it: My Lord and my God.

We experience Jesus' presence most deeply when we are most vulnerable. I know this from my own experience as a cancer survivor; I know it from my experience with others who have been through physical, mental, and emotional crises. Jesus is a wounded God. He is closest to us when we can no longer pretend everything is fine.

Jesus did something else that Easter evening. After he breathed the breath of the Holy Spirit on his followers, he told them, as the Father has sent me, so I send you. What I have done for you, go and do for others. Go and offer a word of hope to those who are in distress. Go and offer forgiveness to those who have wounded you. Go and share what you have, even when you're not sure you have enough. Go and show it's possible to love each other in spite of our differences. Go and proclaim the power of God's love to heal and transform and make new.

Sometimes that means being willing to touch our own wounds, and to show them to others. In his book *The Purpose Driven Life*, Rick Warren says: "Your greatest life messages and your most effective ministry will come out of your deepest hurts. The things you're most embarrassed about, most ashamed of, and most reluctant to share are the very tools God can use most powerfully to heal others." (p.275). The apostle Paul puts it this way, in Eugene Peterson's translation: "Jesus comes alongside us when we go through hard times, and before you know it, he brings us alongside someone else who is going through hard times so that we can be there for that person just as God was there for us" (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

Showing our wounds doesn't come easily for most of us. It's much easier to come alongside others from a position of strength, rather than one of shared weakness. Helping those who are suffering or in need can be a way of making ourselves feel strong and powerful. Our calling in Christ is to come alongside others, not to fix them or remake them in our image, but to stand with them, sharing the vulnerability that is our common human condition. Because that is how healing happens. Jesus has sent us out in the Spirit's power to do this for one another. If you doubt the Spirit's power, just look at what happened in this morning's reading from the Book of Acts. After Jesus appeared to them, those first disciples were utterly transformed. They came out from behind their locked doors and started talking about Jesus. Nothing could stop them. They were arrested and jailed; that didn't stop them. They were hauled into court and threatened with death. That didn't stop them either. Such is the power of resurrection.

Christ is risen. He lives among us, blessing us, giving us peace, sending us out to share healing and hope with the world.

As he said to Thomas, so our Lord says to all of us: Blessed are you who have not seen, and yet believe.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.