

**Sunday, April 16, 2023**  
**Second Sunday of Easter**

John 20.19-31

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/681958800363800>

*(Sermon begins at about 20:50)*

**“The Wounds of Christ”**

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

*The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!*

Every year on the Sunday after Easter, we have the same Gospel story. The story that bears the unfortunate, and inaccurate, name of “Doubting Thomas.” And every year, I say some variation of the same thing. That this is not about Thomas doubting the appearance or existence of the Risen Lord. That, if anything, Thomas is just being cautious until presented with more information to substantiate what is, in the moment, a virtually incomprehensible encounter. That Thomas does not ask for, nor does he receive, anything that the remaining ten disciples have not already received: irrefutable proof that the person appearing before them is not a ghost and is indeed Jesus Christ, resurrected. While all this is the conventional interpretation of today’s Gospel, perhaps that is not the only way to approach this story.

But first, we do need to address the elephant in the room. The whole issue of doubt. After all, regardless of interpretation, the issue of doubt is front and center in the Gospel reading. As Jesus says to Thomas when he appears to him, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” That’s where the whole problem begins. A problem of translation. The Greek word that, in this passage, is translated as “doubt” is actually better translated as “unbelieving.” Now the initial reaction might be, “so what’s the difference?” Admittedly, the difference is very subtle. And our English usage of the two—doubt and unbelieving—as being synonymous, does not help. Yet, the difference in the original Greek is important for our purposes. To doubt means to call into question the truth of something. To lack trust. Whereas to be unbelieving indicates a more nuanced, cautious approach. Almost more of a temporary state of lacking belief while maintaining a willingness to come to belief. That just a little more is needed to move the needle. To doubt implies a stubbornness and unwillingness to believe, whereas unbelief implies an openness to belief.

In the story of Thomas, he is willing to believe. But he needs a little more to go on. We might say that he is merely doing his “due diligence.” Although, in actuality, this uncertainty is not limited to Thomas. In the first encounter between the disciples and the Risen Lord on the evening of Easter Sunday, the ten disciples assembled initially do not recognize Jesus when he appears to them. We are told that after he greets them, he shows them his hands and his side. Only then do the disciples rejoice and recognize who this is before them. While they did not specifically ask for proof, the implication in their lack of recognition, their hesitancy, their uncertainty, their implied unbelief, prompts Jesus to give them proof by showing them his wounds. As if in response to an unspoken collective request on the part of the ten. And

remember, this is after Mary Magdalene had told them that she had seen the Risen Lord. That being the case, they should have been expecting a visit from Jesus. Then we have Thomas, whose response of unbelief is no different than the ten disciples' unbelief. Thomas' request for more information—"Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe"—is really no different than what the other ten needed and received. And note, Thomas does not say that he doubts when the ten tell him they have seen the Risen Lord. He says that he will need to see for himself to be certain.

Of course, this whole interchange and the unfortunate and misplaced focus on doubt always raises the question of faith. Why did Thomas—or the other ten disciples, for that matter—not have faith that this was indeed Jesus risen, as he had foretold? This should not necessarily be chalked up to a lack of faith. I would venture that they did have faith. They wanted to believe. But they just had no frame of reference. Nothing like this had ever happened before. Well, aside from Lazarus, but that was under different circumstances. Even though Jesus had told them he was going to be raised from the dead, they did not know what that would look like. And the fact that no one recognized him upon initially encountering the Risen Lord—not Mary Magdalene, not the ten, and not Thomas—indicates that there was something different about Jesus' appearance. We don't know how or why, but how the Risen Lord was experienced. So, of course they all needed a little more to go on. Mary Magdalene recognized him by something in his voice when Jesus called her name. The ten recognized him when they saw the wounds in his hands and his side. And similarly, Thomas recognizes him when Jesus offers to let Thomas touch his wounds. Which, by the way, Thomas does not actually do. The offer on Jesus' part is sufficient to bring Thomas to belief.

In all cases—Mary Magdalene, the ten, and Thomas—it is not that they don't believe that the Risen Christ has appeared to them. They want to believe. More than anything, they want to see their beloved friend and teacher again. They want what he foretold to be true. If anything they are hesitant to believe, they dare not believe—at least initially—for fear of being hurt again. They have suffered the pain of witnessing Jesus' arrest, his trial, his being beaten and mocked, his being nailed to a cross, his death. They probably couldn't bring themselves to get their hopes up, for fear of them being dashed. For fear of having to bear more loss, more disappointment, more pain.

Which brings us to another aspect of the whole Resurrection story that is often overshadowed by the focus on the question of faith and doubt. And that is the means by which the disciples are able to move from unbelief to belief: Christ's wounds. Not all Gospel accounts of Christ's initial post-resurrection appearances mention him showing his wounds. Matthew and Mark do not. Luke has one reference to the wounds. And here, in John's Gospel, we have two mentions, because of Jesus having to make two initial post-resurrection appearances: one to the ten disciples and one to Thomas.

Of course, we've already established that it was by seeing the wounds from his crucifixion that provides the disciples with sufficient evidence, sufficient proof, by which to recognize the resurrected Jesus. Other than providing a convenient form of proof, one could question why he had wounds at all. Why, in his post-resurrected state, with a form that was somehow new and

unrecognizable to the disciples, this new body would continue to have wounds from his crucifixion. You would think that being raised from the dead into a state of eternal glory, his new body would be perfect, would be complete and whole. Not scarred and wounded. Particularly the Son of God. After all, the image we have of the afterlife is one in which we do not spend eternity in the broken, decrepit, failed body we had at the time of death. Rather we believe that after we die, our heavenly body is a new and improved version, the epitome of health and wholeness. Of course, we have no direct proof of that. It is merely an assumption, albeit a reasonable one. After all, why would God have us spend eternity in Paradise in an impaired, in a less than perfect, form? And particularly, with Jesus being God in-the-flesh, one would think that his post-resurrection form would similarly be the epitome of perfection, of wholeness.

The fact that Jesus continues to bear the wounds of his crucifixion even in his resurrected body must have a purpose. A very important purpose, particularly for those of us who continue in this mortal life. The presence of Christ's wounds is a sign of solidarity. That Christ, and by extension God, are in solidarity with us. Perhaps showing the disciples his wounds was more than just a way of letting them know who he is. The disciples have their own wounds. Certainly wounds from the events of recent days. Wounds that came with witnessing his Passion and crucifixion. They have suffered pain and loss. They are fearful of what could happen next. In showing them his own wounds, Jesus is letting them know they are not alone in their woundedness. He is offering to redeem and heal those wounds.

We all bear the wounds of this life. Wounds that tell the story of our lives. Some of those wounds are visible, as are Christ's wounds. Some of us bear scars from unfortunate accidents—be they inflicted by another person or due to our own actions. Some of us bear scars from acts of violence against our person. Some of us bear scars that are actually positive, such as from a needed, possibly lifesaving, surgery. Of course, not all wounds or scars are visible or even physical. Some of us bear emotional wounds and scars, resulting from being hurt by another. Some of us bear emotional wounds or scars, resulting from unhealthy messages or images conveyed by society or by others in our lives, or even our own unreasonable or unrealistic expectations of ourselves. Some of us bear wounds of unresolved trauma. Some of us bear wounds due to psychological pathologies. Some of us bear scars from being wounded spiritually. The list goes on and on.

As human beings, each one of us bears wounds and scars collected throughout our lives. Some we don't even think about. They are just part of our past, innocuous, benign, just there. Others are more present, either intermittently or persistently. Some might be manageable, as we've learned out of necessity how to deal with them. Others may be less so, being a source of ongoing pain or dis-ease. Some may even be unbearable. Regardless, we all bear wounds of this life.

As strange as it may sound, the good news of the story of Easter, the story of our Lord's resurrection, is that Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, also bears wounds. Wounds that are a reminder to us that we are not alone in our woundedness. A visible reminder that we do not have to bear our wounds alone. A visible reminder that our Lord is willing to help us bear our wounds. That out of love for us, he is willing to take our wounds upon himself to ease our

burden. Maybe he won't completely take the wounds away. After all, they are a part of who we are. A part of what makes us who we are. But with him helping to bear our wounds, they might begin to be redeemed, transformed, and healed. By bearing our wounds with us and for us, by wrapping us in his healing embrace, he gives us yet another sign of how much he loves us. Through his resurrection, he provides us with our own opportunity for resurrection. He provides us with yet another opportunity to live into the fullness of what it means to be beloved children of God. He provides us with yet one more reason to proclaim, along with Thomas, "My Lord and my God!"

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

*The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!*