

Easter 2C 2022

After Christ resurrects, he appears to his disciples, but Thomas is absent.

When the others tell Thomas about their experience, he has a hard time believing it.

Christ therefore reappears—this time, when Thomas *is* present.

As proof of identity, Thomas asks to see the scars in his hands and wound in his side,
and Christ, in an intensely beautiful and intimate moment, lets Thomas touch his
wounds.

It is usually not through our successes, but through our woundedness that we minister to
others.

When we approach from a position of the expert who has all the answers, on the other
hand, we pull away from people, and they can sense it.

When we are at our best, we use our past experiences to identify with and care for others
so that they are not alone.

This is why alcoholics in recovery frequently make amazing clergy.

Thomas' initial absence seems almost like a narrative device, a contrivance that John
creates to make clear that Christ, though resurrected, still bears the scars of being
crucified and pierced in his side.

The renewal we experience, the renewal of Easter, in other words, does not erase our
past, but builds on it.

As we discussed during the Triduum, the three holy days of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil, in life, we necessarily face challenges through which we *may* grow.

We are crucified and may resurrect as a wiser, more loving person, but only if we have enough hope to encourage us to do the necessary work.

We have to understand, in other words, that the effort is worthwhile.

When we do, we eventually learn to tell a new story, our new story.

This requires throwing out old approaches and weaving new ones.

We are forced through experience, that is, to cast aside things that we once believed with our whole heart, which is usually painful work.

In college, when my own experiences in life and my reading of the gospel put me in conflict with the message I was receiving from the church that the defining characteristic of Christianity was the creed and that we must believe the creed literally, I found that I could no longer call myself a Christian.

I left the church and sought something that corresponded with my own experience of reality.

It was over two decades before the church, or at least the Episcopal Church, changed in ways that seemed to be more in accord with what I read in the gospel and what I had experienced in life.

For me, it was a resurrection.

I was reading about this in an article that discussed how some people turn suffering into wisdom.

When we experience the death of a loved one, for example, our whole world is destroyed and must be rewoven.

We let go of old suppositions about the world and build a new understanding of reality.

We do this by telling our story anew.

The process takes time and, for a while, we might go off in some unhelpful and untruthful directions, like feeling that we are somehow to blame.¹

Eventually, we weave a new story, one that is more realistic, but also more useful in creating healing around us.

We can, of course, choose to ignore or deny our suffering, to run from it.

If we do, we become controlled by the pain as we grow cynical, hypocritical, or otherwise out of touch with our own reality.

Only by facing ourselves do we grow.

This is difficult to accomplish if we are unaware that telling our story differently is even a possibility, if we have no hope of resurrection.

The Christian story is one of the greatest embodiments of realistic hope that I know.

1 <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/21/opinion/suffering-trauma-wisdom.html?searchResultPosition=2>

It shows us the path forward in a world that has trouble providing meaningful hope.

There are, of course, the self-help, pollyanna gurus who tell us that everything will be fine if we just learn this one strange trick, but real hope, an indication that there is something purposeful on the other side of profound challenge is hard to offer without considering eternal things.

Unfortunately, our capitalist culture is focused on instant gratification, and the pollyanna gurus play into our desires for easy answers.

Our culture tends not to value things that produce longterm growth and meaning.

Even academia in my experience was mostly about saying whatever would get one published.

I had an anthropology professor, for example, who submitted a well written article that was rejected for publication.

He obfuscated it, that is, he just rewrote the article in more complicated language, and it was quickly published.

He was sad to have proved that there was little interest in truly meaningful discourse in his field.

There are other examples of people intentionally writing nonsensical articles full of jargon and getting them published in the trendiest journals.

When one's primary goal is *self*-promotion rather than the good of all, this is what happens.

That is what makes religion and, in particular Christianity, different.

We are about the longterm good of all.

(Not that people do not often find ways to turn religion to their own advantage, to twist it to their own ends.

When I was a boy, each year, one of our neighbors would go throughout the state holding revivals and would return with a new Cadillac.

Also, meaningful things certainly get published, but one finds the greatest dedication to the eternal questions in religion.)

John's gospel shows us that we cannot avoid scars and cannot escape them once we have experienced them, but we can build something meaningful, something beautiful out of them.

That is a realistic hope.

In his gospel, Christ's scars and wounds become an opportunity for Christ to be vulnerable in order to help Thomas.

He actually lets Thomas stick his hand in his wounds, not hiding them, but opening them up for Thomas to explore.

When we suffer, our difficulties can serve as ways of reaching others.

We become less selfish, more available to others who are suffering, more willing to share ourselves, and more interested in the joy of being present to another human being.

As I told you before, until we reach that stage, we have many ways of pretending to care that are really about avoiding being present to suffering people.

Rather than sitting with someone in his pain, we tell him that God will not give him more than he can handle.

In other words, go handle it; I'm busy pursuing my own happiness.

We tell a grieving person that God simply needed her loved one more than she did.

This is basically saying that her grief is selfish.

“How dare you resent God for taking what God needs?!”

We tell people in misery that everything has a purpose.

In other words, “This is good for you, so leave me alone and let me get back to searching for fun.”

It is not until we experience hardship ourselves that some of us will start prioritizing presence over happiness, relationship over self-interest.

We turn our difficulties into something positive.

We maintain hope, we resurrect, but our scars do not go away.

Our wounds are useful in reaching out to others the way Christ reached out to Thomas when he was unsure.

It is a realistic hope, one that recognizes that crucifixion will come, but the resurrection will come after.

Before that happens, we know that we will have the difficult work of telling our story anew, but that new story will be richer, more relational, more intimate, more caring.

Scars and wounds on a resurrected person are proof of *our* identity as healers.