

KNOWN BY OUR WOUNDS

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Job 5:8-18; John 20:19-31

***“After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side.
Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.”***

John 20:20

It’s one of the most impressive church buildings you could ever visit — although it has no roof, and only three of its four walls are still standing. It’s the Anglican cathedral in Coventry, England: a late-Gothic masterpiece finished in the early 1400s.

On November 14, 1940, 515 heavy bombers of the German *Luftwaffe* attacked the city of Coventry with high explosive and incendiary bombs. The saturation bombing created a firestorm that burned out the center of the city, including the Cathedral. More than 4300 homes were destroyed that dreadful night, and about two-thirds of the buildings in the city were damaged. The devastation was so widespread that the Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels began using the word “coventry” as a verb: to coventry a city was to destroy it utterly from the air.

After the war, a new cathedral was built, of strikingly modern architecture. It was dedicated in 1962. It was not built on the site of the old cathedral, but rather

right next to it. The remaining stone walls — the Gothic stone filigree empty of the stained glass that melted during the firestorm — were allowed to remain.

Outdoors — for there is no roof, still, over that section of the building — there is an altar, located in what used to be a transept of the old church. Atop the altar is a charred wooden cross. It's a replica of a cross a construction worker built out of two blackened roof-beams he found in the rubble after the bombing.

Engraved on the wall behind that altar are two words, in elegant gold lettering: “Father forgive.”

The church authorities could have reconstructed the old cathedral, in all its Gothic glory. It would have taken a long time, but it could have been done. There are still some expert stonecarvers in the world, who practice that medieval trade. Or, they could have bulldozed the sad ruin and constructed something new in its place. What they decided to do, instead, was genius. They preserved the roofless ruin as a witness to peace, even as they constructed a new cathedral of radical twentieth-century design.

The message was clear: we will not forget, but we will not let the painful memory hold us back.

I've been to that place, and I can tell you the combination of the two — the new Cathedral rising out of the ruins of the old — is unforgettable. There are

stunning works of modern art inside the new Cathedral, but it's the mute witness of the old — the charred wooden cross and the words "Father forgive" — that convey the true power of the place.

In a very real sense, it's the scars that speak.

Did you ever wonder why, when the resurrected Jesus returns to earth in the Gospels, he still has his scars? He seems to have changed in some other respects — so much so, even his closest friends have trouble recognizing him at first. Yet, the scars are still there: ugly wounds in his hands and feet, and in his side. If God has given the risen Jesus a "resurrection body," as some have called it — a body that's been purified and perfected — then why not extend that purification and perfection to erase the marks that led to his death?

The late Paul Brand was an orthopedic surgeon, who practiced for many years on the mission field in India, working with victims of Hansen's disease. Hansen's disease is better known by its ancient name, leprosy. Surgery of the hand was a specialty of Dr. Brand's. Reflecting on Jesus' crucifixion, this expert in the physiology of the human hand has this to say:

"It hurts me to think of a nail being driven through the center of my hand or my wrist, because I know what goes on there, the tremendous complex of tendons and nerves and muscles and

blood vessels. It's impossible to drive a spike through without crippling it. The thought of those healing hands being crippled reminds me of what Christ was prepared to endure. In that act, he identified himself with all the deformed and crippled human beings in the world." [Philip Yancey and Dr. Paul Brand, *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made* (Zondervan, 1997).]

The wounds of Jesus Christ — the marks he displays to Thomas and the others, as they're fearfully gathered behind locked doors — were not merely cosmetic. These are disabling wounds, injuries that would have caused real, permanent damage. We've no way of knowing, of course, what degree of healing Jesus experienced — whether, for example, bones once shattered by the iron spikes, tendons sliced in two, were knit together again as life poured back into his body. We do know, though, at the very least, some scars remained.

Why was that? Why would God leave the scars as they were?

I can think of two possible reasons.

The first has to do with the need of certain disciples to see those wounds. The story of Thomas is well-known — how, at the time Jesus first appeared to the disciples, Thomas was not present. When he gets back to the house where they've been staying — laden down with food, perhaps, or whatever else he'd slipped out into the streets of Jerusalem to get — Thomas discovers, to his dismay, he's missed the most important rendezvous of his life. In his despair, he utters his

signature line, the one that's gotten him the undeserved nickname, "Doubting Thomas":

"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." [John 20:25]

The reason I say the doubting reputation is undeserved is because Mary Magdalene likewise couldn't believe it was Jesus, *even when she's looking right at him*. Jesus isn't present when Thomas delivers his line about needing to touch the wounds. It's a perfectly reasonable thing to say, under the circumstances.

A week later, he gets a second chance. Jesus shows up again. This time, Thomas *is* there. Jesus offers him the opportunity to examine his wounds, to touch them, to run his fingertips over the roughness of the scars. Thomas' response is instantaneous: "My Lord, and my God!"

Thomas knows him by his wounds.

That's the first possible reason why the resurrected Jesus retains his scars. It's for the sake of believers like Thomas, concrete thinkers who need to touch and handle and hold before they make up their minds. (Truth be told, there's a little bit of Thomas in all of us.)

The second possible reason is one related to you and to me, an

accommodation to our human condition. Maybe Jesus still has his wounds because we, too, have wounds of our own.

Of course, none of us have been through anything remotely close to the agony of crucifixion, but if we've lived any length of time in this world, it's likely we've picked up a scar or two.

These may be wounds of the physical variety: the corrugated surface of the skin on one finger, where that sharp knife slipped years ago; or perhaps the telltale purple railroad track, laid down by some surgeon who entered the inner sanctum of our body in order to bring healing.

There may also be wounds of the emotional variety: painful memories of some unhappy incident from our childhood; feelings of distrust because someone once hurt us very badly; a constant physical craving for tobacco, or drugs, or alcohol that — even if we're firmly in recovery — may still croon its seductive song each and every day.

Sometimes the scars are visible, peeking out from the surface of our skin. More commonly, our wounds are hidden: either beneath our clothing or concealed deep in the recesses of the soul: rarely talked about, seldom acknowledged. Friends and family, who know us well, know of their existence. They, too, know us by our wounds.

Part of the woundedness I bear in life is caught up in the word “lymphoma.” I was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin lymphoma in December, 2005 and treated with high-dose chemotherapy in the first part of 2006. The disease has not come back since — for which I continue to be grateful — but the doctors have told me my form of the disease is “incurable but treatable.” That’s one very bad word combined with a more hopeful one. They tell me the cancer will probably return some day, although when it does, there are many treatments to choose from, that have an excellent chance of putting it back into remission.

I mention this today only because of something important I’ve learned, as result of that difficult season of life. I’ve learned not to hide the wound. People are diagnosed with cancer every day, and for many, it’s an isolating and lonely experience. I drew great strength from the experience of other cancer survivors, who spoke frankly about what they’d been through. And I drew great strength from my God, who never deserted me in the midst of it all.

Once you become a survivor of something like that, it becomes a part of who you are, for better or for worse. Our wounds, in life, have a way of molding and shaping us.

In that sense, it would have been a difficult thing for Jesus’ disciples, had he shown up in that secluded house with his wounds wiped clean, without so much as

a scar. They knew him by his wounds, and would have been hard-pressed to recognize him, otherwise.

When you or I go through some major life-change, something that leaves us with a scar — be it physical or emotional — we're tempted to wish, sometimes, the scar would just disappear. But that's not always in our best interest. Scars are physical reminders of hard struggle. Sometimes you and I need those living reminders.

Scars are also part and parcel of the healing process. You and I may wish them away, but in fact they continue to be part of our recovery.

Richard Selzer, surgeon and author, has written a marvelous passage in which he reflects on the complexity of the healing processes at work within our bodies. In an essay called, simply, "Skin," he pays homage to what some have called the largest organ in our body: that outermost coating that is our body's interface with the outside world:

"I sing of skin, layered fine as baklava, whose colors shame the dawn, at once the scabbard upon which is writ our only signature, and the instrument by which we are thrilled, protected and kept constant in our natural place.... Gaze upon the skin as I have, through a microscope brightly, and tremble at the wisdom of God, for here is a magic tissue to suit all seasons. Two layers compose the skin — the superficial epidermis and, deeper, the dermis. Between is a plane of pure energy where the life-force is in full gallop. Identical cells spring full-grown here.... No sooner

are these cells formed than they move toward the surface, whether drawn to the open air by some protoplasmic hunger or pushed outward by the birth of newer cells behind.... Here they lie, having lost all semblance of a living cellularity, until they are shed from the body in a continual dismal rain. Thus into the valley of death this number marches in well-stepped soldiery, gallant, summoned to a sacrifice beyond its ken. But let the skin be cut or burned, and the brigade breaks into a charge, fanning out laterally across the wound, racing to seal off the defect. The margins are shored up; healing earthworks are raised, and guerrilla squads of invading bacteria are isolated and mopped up.” [Richard Selzer, *Mortal Lessons* (Simon & Schuster, 1976), pp. 105-106.]

We have a real choice as to how we look at the scars we bear in life. We can view them as part of the problem; or, we can consider them as part of the solution.

Whatever marks remained etched into Jesus’ hands and feet and side after he underwent the miracle of resurrection, they had — by the time of that gathering in the closed room — become a part of who he was, and is. He wore those wounds, if not with pride, then with a certain realistic acceptance.

Some years ago on *The Daily Show*, Jon Stewart had as his guest the movie actor. Michael J. Fox. Fox, as you probably know, has Parkinson’s Disease. At the time of that interview, he had recently gone public with his diagnosis.

He shared, that night, how he had kept his diagnosis secret for seven years.

He was worried about what it would do to his career. As the years went on, he found it hard to live with the lie. He was one of the hottest talents in Hollywood, but he was leading a double life.

Michael frankly admitted how he went a little crazy during those years — partying too hard, drinking too much. But then, he came to a point where he grew comfortable with his diagnosis. He stopped fighting it. He learned to go with the flow.

It's a difficult thing to live a lie, to try to keep our scars hidden from the world. Little by little, it tears you up inside.

Michael J. Fox found a new role for himself. He's now devoted to the very public role as a Parkinson's Disease activist. He's found great reward in making other people's lives a little better. In his own words, from that interview:

“Once you accept it and fix it in space and say, ‘This is this and it’s not anything else and it’s not going to go away any time soon, and you’re going to have to deal with it’ then you open up to all the stuff that’s around it and say, ‘Wow, this gives me an opportunity to help people out, this gives me an opportunity to look at things in a way that I might not have looked at them before...’” [*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, April 6, 2009.]

There's a kind of strength that comes from facing our life-situation honestly, noting our weaknesses as well as our strengths, trying to live as resolutely as we can in the present. When something bad happens that rocks our world, it does no

good to pine for days gone by. Nor does it help to obsess about the future. The art of living with our wounds lies in living victoriously in the here and now.

Accept it. Fix it in space, as Michael says. Admit, “This is this and it’s not anything else and it’s not going to go away.” Then, go searching for the blessings that are still around. You’ll find there are many — far more than you realize.

You and I are known by our wounds, you see. We know ourselves that way, and others know us that way, too. The wounds, and their accompanying scars, become part of who we are in this mortal life.

Far more importantly, there is another one who knows us by our wounds: the one who was himself wounded — and who will one day, we trust, welcome us into an altogether new life.

The Apostle Paul suffered, himself, from some mysterious problem he called his “thorn in the flesh.” We don’t know what it was, exactly, but perhaps we can imagine his joy at picturing himself free, one day, of that debilitating condition. Here’s what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians about the new and perfected life to come:

“Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised

imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality.... Then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.

Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?’”

[1 Corinthians 15:51-54]

In this life — this imperfect and very flawed life — we are inevitably known by our wounds. In the life to come, by the grace of God, we shall know only perfection, and completion and perfect joy.

Let us pray:

Lord, you know us better than we know ourselves.

You know those places deep within us,

the places of pain, of woundedness, of grief unresolved.

Often we convince ourselves that our scars are ugly and shameful.

Teach us to see them, instead, as the place where your healing love meets our deepest pain,

and triumphs over it.

Teach us that it is no shame to be known by our wounds:

for only in that way may others learn what it means

to live victoriously in your love.

In the name of Jesus, our wounded savior, we pray. Amen.