

Scars

Today's Gospel returns us to the moment when the resurrected Jesus appears to his grieving disciples. The women and Peter have been to their teacher's tomb and found it open and empty. Cleopas and another unnamed disciple have returned from Emmaus with a crazy story about recognizing Jesus when he broke bread with them at dinner. Suddenly, Jesus appears out of nowhere. The terrified disciples think they're seeing a ghost until Jesus encourages them to look at him and touch him. He even eats a little fish to prove he's solid and alive.

This reading is from the Gospel of Luke, and it differs slightly from the passage in John's Gospel that Dan preached on so beautifully last week. John doesn't mention Cleopas, and Luke skips right over Thomas. However, the two passages are nearly identical in one crucial way. When Jesus wants to reassure his friends, he doesn't tell them to look him in the face. He doesn't ask them to listen to him, despite his previous observation that sheep always recognize the voice of their good shepherd. Instead, he shows them, and invites them to touch, the marks on his hands, feet, and side that are left from his Crucifixion. It seems our Lord believes that his followers can recognize him most readily if they examine his scars.

Like it or not, scars are a fact of human existence. It's almost impossible to get through life without them. Our bodies record the injuries we suffer throughout our lives, serving as a living testament to our experiences. Like the mark of Cain or Harry Potter's lightning bolt, our scars tell our stories. They're not all bad. Sometimes they remind us of childhood escapades, like the scrape to the chin taken when falling off a bike or the broken nose inflicted in a high school boxing match. Some scars are badges of honor, won in hard-fought sporting contests or military combat. Scars can be glamorous – think of the twin scars on Inigo Montoya's cheeks, inflicted by the six-fingered man who killed his father in *The Princess Bride*. Unfortunately, scars can also

remind us of pain we'd just as soon forget, like the incision and stitch marks left behind after surgery or the faded tattoo of a former spouse's name. These days, we tend to think of scars as embarrassing blemishes, even deformities, something to be hidden away under makeup or clothing. People spend a lot of money and endure significant discomfort to have their scars removed. So why was Jesus so willing to put his own scars on display?

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the 19th century "Prince of Preachers," replies that Jesus's scars were "infallible proof that he was the same person." Spurgeon, along with many other religious leaders, believed that Jesus could have easily removed his scars once he was resurrected. God has the power to do such things. If he had, though, the confused, frightened disciples might have doubted his identity. Bible scholars have struggled to understand why the disciples didn't immediately recognize their resurrected teacher. Even Mary Magdalene, the one who may well have loved him most, initially mistook him for a gardener. I tend to think it was a combination of shock and inability to accept something so unexpected, but Spurgeon suggests that Jesus's ordeal on the Cross must have changed his appearance so much that his face became unrecognizable. His scars, however, told the unique, unmistakable story of his Passion. When the disciples saw his scars, they recognized him and believed.

If Jesus kept his scars just so he could convince his disciples of his identity, however, he might not have them today. Theologians and tradition agree that he does. Spurgeon describes Jesus's scars as "the trophies of his love." They are treasured reminders of the love that brought Christ to the Cross, and that he still brings to his relationship with us. That tells me a few things.

First, Jesus never distances himself from our experience. Precious, beautiful gift that it is, life can be messy, humbling, and painful. Jesus could just leave us to it, watching untouched from above like one of the pagan Olympian gods. Instead, he chose to get down into the blood,

sweat and tears of human suffering, taking on a physical body that could be injured or killed just like our bodies can. He understands our pain because he has shared it, and his compassion for us knows no limits.

Second, Jesus's scars are a visible reminder of how powerful he is. You may have seen recent media reports that some people are afraid Christianity is under attack. Respectfully, Scripture doesn't support their fears. We have just completed our annual walk with Jesus through Holy Week, watching as humankind did its absolute utmost to destroy the Son of God. They betrayed him, mocked him, beat him, scourged him, crucified him, killed him, and entombed him. Three days later, he was back, alive and well. Were it not for his scars, you'd never even know his Passion happened. Humanity lacks the power to destroy our God, thank heaven. We can break his heart, which is bad enough, but we can't do him permanent physical damage.

History has proven that Christianity is almost as resilient as Christ himself. The principalities and powers of this fallen world have tried to destroy Christianity since its birth, and they always fail. Christianity remains the largest religion in the world, claiming about a third of humanity as its members. Although the percentage of Christians in the United States has decreased, PRRI reported just four years ago that seven out of ten Americans still identify themselves as Christian. Younger worshippers are leaving our faith in greater numbers than before, but their reasons often have less to do with external attacks than with the internal failings of our churches. Pressure to adhere to a particular political agenda drives some young people away; scandals, hypocrisy, and bigotry repel still more. Christianity itself isn't the problem. Our faith remains powerful enough to attract adherents worldwide, even in countries that execute people simply for owning Bibles. The problem is that our churches don't always live as if we believe what we say. If we want to retain young Christians in this country, our churches need to

practice what Christ preached. We needn't fear outside opposition; Christianity will continue to thrive so long as we remain faithful to Jesus's commandment to love God with all our hearts, minds, and strength and love our neighbors – *all* our neighbors – as ourselves.

Third, Jesus's scars prove that he was horrifically injured, *and* they prove that he recovered. Just three days after his crucifixion, Jesus returned to his friends with healed wounds that they could see and touch. His scars showed them, and us, that suffering and death are not the entire, tragic truth of life, no matter how badly they hurt us at first. Scars mark the places where we have been injured. They also bear witness to the blessed, miraculous truth that even the gravest injuries can, and do, heal.

Not all of our injuries are physical. In the course of a lifetime, most of us suffer emotional and spiritual wounds in addition to those that mark our bodies. Because those wounds aren't immediately visible, people around us can break them open without even knowing it. Maybe it's different for you but, in my experience, emotional and spiritual injuries heal a lot slower than physical injuries do, and they're often accompanied by deep shame. It's hard to resist the temptation to hide them, present a brave face to the world, and hope no one ever catches on.

This is a place where Jesus can help. His scars prove that he is a God who understands our pain and willingly shares it with us. They remind us that our wounds, like his, can heal, leaving us changed but not ruined. They urge us to put down our shame and come to him in prayer, giving him our painful memories so he can transform them into stories of healing and hope. Unlike Jesus, most of us can't recover from serious injuries in just three days. It takes time and patience. But in the scarred hands of our loving God, our wounds can begin to heal. We can wear our scars, as he does, not as shameful evidence of our human frailty, but as proof that we, like Jesus, can come through pain and find love waiting for us on the other side. Amen.