

Psalm 133
John 20:19-31
Communion

Second Sunday of Easter
Midway Presbyterian Church
April 8, 2018

The Wounded Healer

Introduction to the Psalm

Our Psalm for this Second Sunday of Easter stresses the beauty of people living in harmony. It is one of a group of psalms that bear the heading, “Psalms of Ascent.” And it is likely that these psalms were sung as pilgrims made their way to Jerusalem to worship. Listen to these words from Psalm 133...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

Our Gospel Lesson today provides an opportunity for the church to reflect upon an appearance of Jesus to the disciples where Jesus blesses them with his peace. At first, Thomas doubts the disciples’ report that they have seen Jesus, but eight days later at another appearance when Thomas is present, he sees Jesus’ wounds and believes. And Jesus pronounces his blessing upon all who have not seen, and yet believe. Listen to these words from John 20:19-31...

Sermon

Today is the Second Sunday *of* Easter. In most churches the pews are not as full as they were last Sunday, and the Alleluias are a faint echo. The lilies are gone from the sanctuary, and there’s no wonderful- smelling ham to come home to. Those dyed Easter eggs that wound up in the potato salad—they’re gone, too. Last Sunday was special; but this Sunday, sadly, things are back to normal. To be in worship today can feel a bit like showing up at a party after most of the guests have gone home, and those who remain tell you about what a good time you missed by coming late. No wonder this Sunday has become known as “Low Sunday.”

There's a cartoon that shows a Sunday School teacher sitting in a circle with her pre-school class. She is concerned because a little boy is crying. The girl sitting beside the boy is trying to make him feel better. She says, "Don't worry Bobby, he doesn't stay dead. God's gonna make him alive again."

Bobby is surely relieved to know that. And so are we. We would hate for the story to end at the cross—especially considering the fact that Jesus was crucified because of human sinfulness. If the tomb were not empty, the final three words spoken in this story would be sin, suffering, and death.

But, as with the girl in the cartoon, we are quick to point out—sometimes too quick—that Jesus did not remain in the grave, but God raised him from the dead, winning an eternal victory. The three words of suffering, sin, and death are not the end of the story. The last word is that the Word made flesh, who dwelt among us full of grace and truth, is the risen and eternal Word spoken by God for all people, for all time.

But while being the glorious end of the story and the final word, the resurrection does not mean that we should forget the birth, the life, the suffering and the death of Jesus. How he lived, and how he died, is not rendered meaningless by the fact that he was raised from the dead.

Our Gospel Lesson from John 20 helps us to remember that the *risen* Christ is also the *crucified* Christ. The most dramatic part of this scripture is the conversation Jesus has with the one we have come to know as doubting Thomas. We hear Thomas' great affirmation, "My Lord and my God!" And Jesus' encouraging words for others, "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe."

Today however, I don't want to focus on the conversation Jesus had with Thomas. I want us to appreciate the significance of the appearance of Christ, noting that Jesus appeared before

Thomas *as the crucified one*. His resurrected body was not a glorious body where the wounds of the cross were healed and done away with—not yet. Thomas could have reached forward and put his finger in the hole in Jesus’ side where the centurion had lanced him. Jesus’ hands and feet bore the marks of the nails used to fix him to the cross.

A quick conclusion is that those wounds were there only to prove something to Thomas. But our passage tells us that even when Jesus first appeared to the other disciples, they saw his wounds. So, something far more profound is being proclaimed. The *risen* Christ was the same Christ who had suffered on the cross. The *risen* Christ was the same one who had lived, taught, healed, and forgiven. Who called people to follow him. John wants us to know that the *risen* Christ is the same Jesus who was with the twelve, who in the Upper Room had stooped to wash their feet, who shared there with them a holy supper, who was betrayed, crucified, dead, and buried. All of that is not forgotten when he was raised from the dead.

In a way, that is the best news of all—that not only did God fully identify with us in our humanity when Jesus was among us, but that God continues to identify with us still. When we suffer, God is right there with us. When we are tempted, God still knows that struggle. When we sin, God knows the pain. When we face death, we do not face death alone. The resurrection story here in John tells us that God continues to fully understand all the trials and tribulations of being human. As the old Spiritual sung by Louis Armstrong declares:

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen
 Nobody knows but Jesus
 Nobody knows the trouble I've seen
 Glory hallelujah!

It is similar to the importance of our not forgetting what *we* have been through either. Those who have experienced the trauma of abuse, neglect, or abandonment, cannot deal with those experiences by simply pretending they never happened. To really leave a bad experience

behind, we first need to accept the fact that it happened. If we had any part in what caused the suffering, we need to admit it, ask God's forgiveness, accept God's forgiveness, and forgive ourselves. And we need to forgive others for any fault they had. And sometimes things happen which are simply beyond anyone's control, like acquiring certain illnesses, and that needs to be accepted as well. Then, by God's grace we can move on from a bad experience, seeing it as an important, but closed chapter of our lives.

The great spiritual guide, Henry Nouwen, titled one of his books The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society. There he reflected on the fact that sometimes it is those who have been wounded who have the greatest ability to heal. Those who have been through a crisis and have discovered the power and grace of God to see them through can often be the most help to others facing a crisis. A person who has known depression may be uniquely able to help someone who has fallen prey to this disease. A person who has experienced divorce, may be a special help to someone dealing with the breakup of a marriage. A doctor who has had a heart attack can still help a person with heart problems. The resurrected wounds show us that Christ, having faced the worst of what we have to face, remains the most powerful wounded healer of the sin-sick world.

In Isaiah we read:

But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed. (53:5)

In his book, Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery, Dr. Richard Selzer tells a wonderful story—a parable, I think, of how God, through the resurrected Christ, still meets us where we live.

I stand by the bed where a young woman lies, her face postoperative, her mouth twisted in palsy, clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth, had been severed. She will be thus from now on. The surgeon had followed with religious fervor the curve of her flesh; I promise you that. Nevertheless, to remove the tumor in her cheek, I had to cut the little nerve.

Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed, and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me, private. “Who are they?” I ask myself, “He and this wry mouth I have made, who gaze at each other so generously, greedily?” The young woman speaks.

“Will my mouth always be like this?” she asks. Yes,” I say, “it will. I had to cut the nerve.” She nods and is silent. But the young man smiles. “I rather like it,” he says. “I think it is kind of cute.”

All at once I know who he is. I understand and lower my gaze. . . . Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth and I am so close I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers, to show her that their kiss still works.

That’s what the resurrected wounds remind us. That yes, our lives have been distorted in some way. But also that God let his embodied self be cut and distorted in order to meet us at the places of our deepest need.

What Thomas needed was to see the risen Jesus. And not rejecting his doubt, Jesus met his need. In his life among us Jesus said what we needed to hear and did what we needed to see. And the resurrected wounds show us that God still thinks we are someone special. He forgives and heals and assures us that we are still loved.

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” Perhaps a fitting blessing for those who show up in worship a week after the Easter celebration. This is Jesus’ last beatitude, his blessing pronounced on all of us who, unlike Thomas, have not seen, yet believe. And part of that blessing is the comfort that the *risen* Christ is the same Jesus whom we have come to know and love through the scriptures—The Wounded Healer.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.