

The Rev. Kerith Harding's Sermon Easter 3B April 15, 2018

Luke 24:36b-48

Jesus himself stood among the disciples and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.

It was another busy news week, so you could be forgiven for missing a searing piece in the New Yorker by the writer Junot Diaz.¹ His essay is a letter he addresses to a young man who stood in line at one of his book signings years ago in Amherst; a man who stood out for his intensity and quiet, but more for the unexpected question he asked Diaz once he got in front of him at the book signing table. Diaz had included scenes of childhood abuse in one of his novels and the young man asked, "Did it happen to you, too?"

The letter Diaz writes to this unknown man is a gripping apology for sidestepping the question, for hiding behind what he calls "a mask." It then becomes a moving account of all the ways his childhood experience distorted his loves, hijacked his decisions, and forced him to fashion for himself a well-crafted, comfortable mask, a persona to whom nothing abusive had occurred, a persona that left behind his pain and his loneliness.

Diaz made a decision that many good people make — to treat his wounds and scars as weakness, and to hide them.

¹ <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/04/16/the-silence-the-legacy-of-childhood-trauma>

The essay then takes us through Diaz's long journey to undo that decision, and *instead* fight for wholeness, which included spending time in the tragic experience that set in motion such isolation and destructiveness. And of it he writes, "*I'd always assumed that if I ever returned to that place, that island where I'd been shipwrecked, I would never escape; I'd be dragged down and destroyed. And yet, irony of ironies, what awaited me on that island was not my destruction but nearly the opposite: my salvation.*"

What Junot describes is his own paschal journey, from death into new life — a new life where, like the Jesus in this morning's Gospel, his wounds have not been magically erased, but transformed.

Jesus greets his followers with tenderness in this scene, imploring them gently, "*Why are you frightened... look at my hands and feet, see that it is myself.*" The nail wounds, we can imagine, were still there; the marks of Jesus' most powerless moments, when forces and people beyond his control, brought on his torture and death. Those wounds would soon heal, but the scars would be visible.

Unlike Diaz, and I suspect some of us, Jesus doesn't hide his wounds. He didn't hide behind a mask, a mask that announced to his disciples that he was "back and better than ever," a mask that pretended the events of Good Friday really weren't all that bad. You've all, no doubt, seen those "Surfer Jesus" figurines where Jesus is perched on a surfboard, showing a big grin, giving us the thumbs up. Jesus didn't appear to the disciples this way after Good Friday. He did not pretend nothing bad had happened.

Jesus instead offers his hands and his feet for viewing — and in John's Gospel, for actual touching. He makes them visible and available, and in so doing they become a conduit that connects him to his followers, that establishes intimacy, that assures them that yes, they do know him.

Jesus understands that we recognize each other by our wounds.

How we relate to our own woundedness can make all the difference in life. Do we seek to hide our failings and our flaws, our shames and our fears? Or do we seek to bring them into the light?

Henry Nouwen wrote, *“How are we healed of our wounding memories? We are healed first of all by letting them be available, by leading them out of the corner of forgetfulness, and by remembering them as part of our life stories. To heal does not primarily mean to take pains away, but to reveal that our pains are part of a great pain, that our sorrows are part of a great sorrow, that our experience is part of the great experience of him who said, “But was it not ordained that the Christ should suffer and so enter into the Glory of God?”*

Our wounds can carry enormous power. They can alienate us from each other, or they can be that which connects us.

Jesus is not suggesting we tell the woman who is bagging our groceries about our wounds or the guy who comes to mow the lawn.

Connection isn't usually found in those kinds of spontaneous self-disclosures. Connection is found when we make our wounds available to God, whose loving, healing presence draws us out of ourselves and makes us see that so many others are wounded too. Maybe similarly, maybe differently, but wounded, nonetheless.

And then we begin to see others as people, people just like us, carrying heavy burdens, and perhaps in need only of a kind, encouraging word.

In Diaz's essay, he chronicles a life of decisions and behaviors that were self-defeating, baffling, injurious to himself and to others, and some of those others loved him deeply.

He broke their hearts.

His unhealed, hidden wounds broke their hearts.

It can be a useful reminder to all of us that sometimes the person who has hurt us the most is not simply a jerk, but wounded.

Many of you have heard, I am sure, that we had some altar linens stolen directly off the altar earlier this week. It was an unprecedented theft here, as far as I know, and word got out to the community. Our preschool provider, Rochelle, heard about it through social media and offered her regrets to me. “Who does this sort of thing?” I said out loud, not really looking for a response, “I mean, seriously! Who steals the linens off an altar!” Shaking her head she responded, “They must be carrying an awful lot of pain.”

It was a needed reminder to me that the St. John’s vandal this week is likely not a mean-spirited person, but someone who is in a lot of pain, and pain makes us do foolish things. Our pain often makes us hurt other people. This is why Jesus tells his disciples that “*repentance and forgiveness of sins shall be proclaimed in his name,*” because Jesus knows wounded people will continue to wound, and the only doorway out of that cycle is repentance and forgiveness.

Toni Morrison once wrote, “Anything dead coming back to life hurts.” Easter is a time of triumph for the church, sure, but that triumph is not without its cost. Honesty and humility, repentance and forgiveness — these are not easy roads to walk. But Easter is a time where we courageously choose to collaborate with the healing power of God, where we have full confidence that we will not be abandoned or punished. Our wounds are teachers, and they show us that we are no better than those who have hurt us. Our wounds can be masks that divide and hurt - or - conduits that connect and forgive. Jesus’ resurrection forever ensures that by our wounds we will be known, we will be connected to God and to others, and we will be healed. AMEN.