

Unless I See the Holes in his Hands

John 20:19-31

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A good number of years ago, a friend of writer and theologian Barbara Brown Taylor lost his father very suddenly to a heart attack.¹ This friend had rushed to the hospital but arrived too late. He never had a chance to say his good-bye or tell his father one more time that he loved him. The first time he actually saw his father's body was at the funeral home. He walked up to the casket and, somehow, immediately felt drawn to take one of his father's hands in his own.

Their hands were the same shape and size. They were huge paws and had the look of being able to fix anything and yet they were soft, too. These hands had built porches and held babies as they drifted off to sleep. His father had indeed preferred work that used his hands and was "hands on." His dad had been an auto-mechanic who took tremendous pride in his work. He likened his own work to that of a careful and skilled surgeon. The dad kept a clean shop as a surgeon would keep a sterile operating room. Every night, he scrubbed his hands carefully with a boar's bristle brush so that he could come home to his family and offer his affection without grime sticking to him.

Despite all his careful tending to his hands, they had become stained in places and it was those stains that the son was looking for. As he turned his father's hand over in his own, he saw the traces of motor oil deep in the fingerprints. He recognized the dark callouses his father had acquired from handling heavy metal objects. Somehow, seeing these marks was oddly reassuring in the midst of loss. The son smiled and thought to himself: "It's him. They tried to clean him up but, look, they couldn't. It's my daddy. It's really him."

I imagine all of us have specific physical connections to loved ones like that. There is some characteristic mark from a mole, a scar or tattoo to certain smell or a specific

¹ The story is taken from Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*, "Hands and Feet" (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1999), 121.

piece of clothing – small but important details that undoubtedly connects us with a loved one.

Thomas in our Gospel story from John needs to see Jesus' hands and feet to come to terms not so much with the news of loss but with the completely improbable news that his friend has risen from the dead. He needs to know that his friends really saw Jesus, this friend he admired, loved and lost so tragically. He is often labeled "doubting Thomas" but I think that is too simplistic a label. Doubt is a part of the journey of faith. And, as Richard Rohr and others have noted, the opposite of faith is not doubt but fear and/or a lack of trust in God's love.

Notice also that Jesus explicitly shows his hands and side to the other disciples as well earlier on in our passage John 20:20a. They just don't ask to actually touch him. Yes, Thomas struggled like all the others to follow Jesus but he is an authentic seeker and friend of Jesus. Thomas dared to ask out loud when he did not understand what Jesus was talking about. The others were just as clueless or confused but did not want to look stupid. For example, when Jesus told his friends that he was preparing a place for them in his "father's house" and that they knew where he was going (John 14), it was Thomas who spoke up and said 'we don't have a clue' where you are going. Thank God for people like Thomas.

Jesus loves his friend so much that he returns to reassure him that the good news of his resurrection is really true. Jesus wants Thomas to have the peace he has been promising his followers throughout their time together and is offering again now. It is a peace with many dimensions. It is a peace that comes from knowing that the crucifixion was not the last word. The one they loved and thought lost is alive and his vision will continue. It is also a peace offered to the disciples as people who are frightened for their own lives, huddled behind closed doors for fear of persecution. If death does not have the power to destroy Jesus, it will not be able to destroy them no matter what lies ahead.

It is also the challenging peace of forgiveness. Jesus could have sat them all down and scolded them for abandoning him, for their cowardice and lack of faith. Instead, he offers his peace that reassures them that here is indeed nothing that can separate them from his love. What amazing love and graciousness the Risen One offers. At the same time, this peace of grace and new beginnings in the face of failure is also accompanied by the admonition to offer the same peace to others. Just as Jesus is willing to break the violent cycle of “an eye for an eye” that does leave the world blind, they are challenged to break the cycles of violence and fear that mark their own lives. They can meet the anger, fear and rejection they will experience in the world with judgment and retribution or they can meet it with forgiveness. The power to bind everyone in the grip of death or to release others into newness of life is as much in their hands as it is in ours.

I think there is also another kind of peace Jesus offers. What is particularly remarkable about the encounter between Jesus and Thomas is not only that Jesus loves his friend with all his questions, his pain and shortcomings. It is also that the risen Christ in this story comes bearing his wounds to affirm that his friend refuses to pretend that the crucifixion never happened. Thomas is the spokesperson of all who experience the shock, trauma and pain that comes from losing someone we love. He will not be consoled easily or forget the trauma of the crucifixion and his friend’s suffering. He knows that the soldiers drove nails into his hands and feet and that Jesus’ side was pierced with a long spear. The pain of all that and the knowledge of his own inability and failure to stop it all are too deep. His refusal to believe his friends’ word comes from a place of caring that is deeper than words can express.

This crucified and risen God, embodied in Jesus, is not immune to suffering and preaches and offers peace in the midst of it. He is not asking people to forget their pain or what happened to them. He is modeling and asking for a way forward despite real wounds and real suffering. Keeping a visible sign of suffering is a way to acknowledge its reality not only in the life of Jesus but of every created being.

There was a group of early Christians called “Docetists” who rejected the notion that Jesus ever really suffered. They saw Jesus as fully and exclusively divine and immune to the suffering known to humans. In the face of such attitudes, our Gospel insists otherwise. To all who have experienced suffering, our Gospel proclaims: Jesus knows suffering and disfiguration. As one who dies violently on the cross, Jesus lives, dies, and rises in full solidarity with those who are brutalized, tortured and dehumanized in our world. He understands the trauma of Christians in Sri Lanka who have lost loved ones in a recent massacre. Their death was in part a retaliation against the senseless killing of Muslims in New Zealand not long ago. The wounds of the Risen Christ also manifest the wounds of those killed in mosques in New Zealand and of the Jewish worshipper who was murdered while worshipping in the synagogue. To such senselessness, the risen Jesus says “Peace be with you.”

As the disabled God, Jesus also knows of the suffering of all who live with debilitating diseases or find themselves disabled as a result of some tragedy no matter whose fault it was. He knows what it is like to lose your strength after a long battle with cancer. He knows suffering in his own body. Jesus knows it for good, not as an abstraction. As the resurrected one he is also the survivor who gives hope for life even if that may mean life beyond this life we know. The risen Christ with his wounds in his hands, feet and side not only comforted his living friends so many centuries ago to help them find faith in the promise of life in the face of death.

Just as this story was intended to encourage early Christians of John’s community who were trying to follow Christ a generation removed from the original events, it is also intended to encourage us in our day. We may not see the living Christ with his visible wounds standing in our midst but we can imagine him at the side of one of our own who has died and glimpse his presence there. We can ask for and offer forgiveness in our own relationship. We can promote it in the interactions of our world and glimpse his presence there when such forgiveness is offered and received instead of retribution. We can offer him the regrets and failings of our own life and imagine his words of peace to us as well and know his presence there.

Such is the work of Easter living in the context of our real lives. May Christ's peace indeed be with us as we seek to welcome him as the risen one who can break through the walls of our pain, fears, betrayals, and doubts. Amen.