

Hinde Street Methodist Church
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Sunday after Easter

Introduction

If you are thinking that our gospel reading about doubting Thomas has come around again quickly in our three year cycle of readings, you would be right. Every year on the Sunday after Easter we hear about Thomas doubting then believing, although paired each year in the cycle with different readings.

Fortunately for preachers there is a lot in this reading: not only do we have Thomas' story, we have:

- John's version of the Great Commission: "as the Father sent me, so I send you".
- instruction about forgiving sins: "if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained"
- and Jesus breathing the Holy Spirit upon the disciples

This year I noticed that the resurrected Jesus in this account still has his wounds. He was victorious over death, but marks of dying hadn't gone. Resurrected, Jesus can appear even when the door is locked, can go unrecognised until a defining moment and ensure a massive catch of fish. Yet he still has wounds on his hands, his feet and his side. We have an empty cross but a resurrected saviour who carries the marks of suffering.

I think I noticed it because of two foot operations last year. During that I learnt two things. Things you may already have known.

Firstly, it is not appropriate to talk about your wounds in public.

The first people I would see after my hospital appointments were my work colleagues. It was a minor operation, I thought no different to saying I was having a tooth removed. I quickly learnt it wasn't appropriate to explain the procedure after several colleagues nearly fainted.

Secondly, some people find a damaged human offensive.

On a couple of occasions complete strangers came up to me, looked horrified at my bandaged foot and dramatically asked "what I had done to myself". I'd done nothing apart from sign a consent form and turn up at day surgery at the appointed time. It felt like my less than perfect form offended them, strange to me when surgery healed a deformity usually hidden.

If Jesus, whose wounds were way beyond my four stitches, had shown his injuries in an office, would his colleagues have made clear this was not suitable for work? If Jesus had walked down the street in sandals and his cuffs turned up, would strangers have come up to him to ask him "what he had done to himself"? There is more going on than Jesus showing his wounds to prove it was him and his death wasn't a trick.

We have 40 days of lent to prepare us for Jesus' death. We have 40 days from Easter until Ascension Day to understand the resurrection – not just to re-read the stories but to understand it's meaning. What does a theology of a wounded and victorious Christ look like? And what does it mean for us today?

Victory over what?

Many of us struggle with the triumphalism in Easter hymns and prayers. We may prefer to stay with the suffering Jesus of Good Friday, who knew pain, injustice and hardship rather than the

resurrected Jesus perhaps described in the same way as a military victory whose success is emphasised to hide the terrible cost.

Thomas' encounter with Jesus, risen yet still wounded, can help us find a way through. I think the key is to ask "victory over what". The readings paired this year with Thomas' encounter help us answer that question.

Victory over nothingness and abandonment

Both Acts and Psalms describe victory over Hades, Sheol or the pit. These words are often translated as hell, but expressed a fear of nothingness and abandonment rather than of punishment.

It is perhaps best imagined as a fear of falling down a pit and being able to hear life going on around you, but being so deep no one can hear you or rescue you. Having once got locked in a building (top tip: don't go to the toilet at the end of the last event of the day) I saw people through the glass doors but no matter how hard I knocked it was ages before anyone saw me.

There is a tradition that between his death on Good Friday and resurrection on Easter Sunday Jesus went down to the pit. Icons show the harrowing of hell or hades: Jesus breaks through, descends and tramples on the nothingness.

This is a victory over separation – God is ever present.

Freedom and a power reversal

Peter's speech in Acts reminds us that God raised Jesus up, "having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power." Victory brings freedom and power.

Many people are wounded because of the abuse of power.

Many lack power because they are deemed to be impaired or not properly functioning in some way.

Many have to work twice as hard to do things that others, deemed 'normal' or 'whole', don't even think about.

Our Psalm reminds us that we have no good apart from through God. Some people have been asked to sign forms agreeing that if they are ill they won't go to hospital or receive invasive medical procedures. In response, some people with disabilities have posted about their contribution to justify not signing. We risk muddling up many things here.

The Psalmists "I have no good apart from you" might feel like a cry from a dark place of worthlessness, but if we measure our value through God's worth that's about as valuable as it gets. As we approach communion we pray: "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed." No one need prove their worth through what they have done or what they might do. Decisions an individual takes about admission to hospital or receiving particular treatment should seek to work out only the point at which medical treatment no longer provides healing.

Freedom and power. Plenty of people believe they can protect themselves from death through the power of money or the power that comes with their status or position. This is a victory that overturns the normal order of things, a victory for those who feel they cannot protect themselves from death.

Peter reminds us that God is at our right hand so that we will not be shaken. This is a victory for those who are shaky on their feet, whose grip trembles or who feel their hold on life is shaky. Jesus retakes the power for those who have had the power taken away from them.

Touching the wounds we have caused

Jesus' resurrection is a victory over nothingness and abandonment, and brings freedom and a power reversal. Our readings this morning make a third, more difficult point. They ask: who killed Jesus.

Peter pulls no punches: "this man, [...] you crucified and killed [...]". Jesus was killed by Jerusalem, by the religious and political leaders who thought they were acting in the greater good but were actually acting in self-defence. The wounds come from those who misuse their power and freedom. They do not come from God.

Rachel Mann writes:

"The angry God who needs appeasing isn't up there in 'heaven'; that's not God. The angry God is us. The angry, jealous, wrathful God beats within us. Demands a victim. It wants to make a victim of queer people, or any other group or person who does not measure up to the normative rules of the dominant group. To the question "Who killed Christ?" the answer surely has to be that we did."

The squeamishness my poor colleagues experienced when I spoke about my foot operation was a disgust mechanism that helps us keep away from what might be contagious. When it's a virus that is healthy. But where it is the pain we are causing others, it hides us from the impact of our actions.

Jesus' wounds confront us with the pain we are causing in the world. They make visible what is normally hidden or silenced – that loss of power and freedom. As long as we ask: "what have you done to yourself" rather than "what have we done to you" the damaging contagion will continue. We need to lose our squeamishness.

We don't know how Thomas responded to Jesus' invitation to "put your finger here" and "reach out your hand and put it in my side". Jesus makes the same invitation to us: "put your finger here". How we will respond?

Conclusion – healing Serpent Christ

Jesus' death and resurrection is a victory over abandonment and nothingness. Jesus' death and resurrection brings freedom and empowers. Jesus' death and resurrection challenges us to touch the wounds we have caused.

All three are about healing.

This year as I heard the bible readings in Lent I could see the parallels with what I knew would come at Easter. Particularly so with the story of Nicodemus. Jesus says to Nicodemus: 'Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up...';

If you remember, the Israelites in the wilderness grumbled a lot. They complained about only having one thing to eat, even though it was manna from heaven (the equivalent, perhaps, of having everything possible to survive a pandemic and then complaining about flour shortages). Eventually, God sends snakes. Dying from snake bites, they appealed for mercy. God tells Moses to make a bronze serpent and put it on a pole. Anyone who is bitten looks at the bronze serpent and is healed.

You might have seen a snake wrapped around a pole as a symbol of medicine; indeed it is the logo of the World Health Organisation, although we can debate whether it is this story or a different

Greek myth it is taken from. It appears in some churches. It is a complex image. The source of pain becomes the means of healing.

Jesus is saying we can look upon his “lifting up”, his death and resurrection, as a source for our healing. This, too, as we’ve explored this morning, is a complex image. But I can summarise it by saying:

1. If you are overwhelmed by loneliness and abandonment, look upon Jesus, wounded and victorious
2. If you are overwhelmed by powerlessness and your own wounds, look upon Jesus, wounded and victorious
3. If you are overwhelmed by wounds you have inflicted on others, look upon Jesus, wounded and victorious

Amen