

Sermon: Relatable Faith

Written by: Rev. Jessica Ashcroft-Townsley

Scripture: John 20:19-31

The Sunday after Easter in some churches is Holy Humor Sunday. As I thought about this in the light of our scriptures this week, I couldn't quite "get there" in making this Sunday all about the fun and the laughter.

Certainly, in having me as your pastor, you'll have a lot of light moments. It should be clear by now that I don't take myself too seriously and God knows I'll make enough mistakes up here to keep us laughing for years to come!

In our lives and in our work, chances are that we're going to make mistakes. Some of those mistakes will be the result of our own clumsiness as many of mine have been. That clumsiness has been with me for most of my life. When I'm on point with my yoga practice, I find that I'm less clumsy, but I haven't been on with that lately and certainly didn't do yoga when I was growing up. I was so clumsy as a kid that my fifth-grade teacher said she wanted to put me in a bubble out at recess. Part of the issue was that I didn't want to hang around on the playground with the girls, but wanted to play sports—which meant I was playing with boys who were bigger and rougher than I was. Of course, I got hurt. In that course of all the bruises and scrapes, as you can imagine, I developed a few scars. Over time, as happens to the best of us, those scars became more numerous so that now I rather think I have a body full of them. And each one carries with it a memory.

Some of them, the ones that happened during sacred moments in my life like, for instance, my scars from two C-sections, leave relatively happy sacred memories when the miracle of the birth of my sons touched my life.

Others, like the scar on my wrist from a shattered radius in 2019, the scars from numerous biopsies since I was a kid, or the small scars from my emergency appendectomy last December, have a whole different sacred meaning for me. Those are the scars that represent the moments when I had to draw nearer to God than usual. They remind me of God's presence in my life in the most difficult of moments. Those are holy scars representative of holy "God sightings" that life has thrown my way. Those moments when it was ever so clear to me that God had shown up, because how else was I going to get through that painful moment in life without the love of the God who created and loves me unconditionally?

Our texts this morning from the gospel of John pick up in the immediate aftermath of the glorious resurrection and Mary's encounter with Jesus. Just as he has done for me at painful moments, Jesus shows up to the disciples, who have returned to the upper room. In their grief and sorrow over losing their teacher, they all encounter the risen Jesus to shouts of joy and tears of relief. All of them, that is, except for one: Thomas.

Of all the disciples, perhaps none is so well known to the casual observer of scripture as our so-called "Doubting Thomas." Even folks who don't go to church have heard this moniker. He's the disciple who needs not just to see, but to feel to believe. I heard him referred to this week in a clergy discussion as the UCC Saint—the one with the courage to ask questions. To me, this is one of the things that makes Thomas the most relatable of the male disciples: his willingness to say the quiet part out loud. Thomas has questions and, like Peter, he expresses them. But it's not just that Thomas asked the question, it was that Thomas had faith that Jesus would receive his question, understand his need, and fill it. Thomas's response to

the idea of the risen Jesus, Jesus's kindness in dealing with Thomas, and then Thomas's willingness to actually touch Jesus's wounds is one of the most moving moments in scripture to me. It speaks of a God of such boundless patience and abundant compassion that not only does he present himself to Thomas, but that he gives Thomas what he needs. In our times of trial and pain, this is all of our deepest hope: that God will give us what we need.

"Doubting Thomas" is a moniker I don't particularly like because Thomas exhibits no more doubt than anyone else might in his position. The other disciples don't need to doubt because Jesus has already shown himself to them. But even if he were the only one to show such a response, I still would not like that "doubting Thomas" is seen as a derogatory term, one that denotes a lack of faith. It's not a deficiency in his faith that Thomas exhibits here. It's not a weakness. It's a strength. Thomas is registering his doubts and taking those directly to his God. He's being honest that his faith is just that: faith. He doesn't have certainty. He doesn't know all that God knows and admits his struggle with this idea of his teacher and friend rising from the dead. Thomas is being genuine in admitting that a part of his faith is that he has doubts. Without doubt, faith wouldn't be faith, would it? It would be knowledge. Or, as Paul Tillich has famously written: "Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is an element of it."

But what Thomas seeks here isn't just a living proof text to assuage his doubts, what he seeks is a holy experience. He doesn't just want to see the risen Jesus, he wants to touch him. But he doesn't just want to touch him to prove that he's a physical presence, he wants to touch the wounds that Jesus received as he gave himself over in full-hearted love of humanity on

the cross. Thomas wants to have a tactile, holy experience of Jesus. That's what he needs.

Jesus responds by giving him exactly that. You may touch these wounds on my body, which was given for you. Jesus follows with a remark about the blessedness of believing without seeing, but while this is often read as a scolding Thomas is receiving, nothing in the text suggests Jesus uses such a tone with his disciple. He doesn't say anything about Thomas being less blessed because he needs to see and feel to believe. He's simply saying, as theologian Marcus Borg observed, that there will be some who come to him without having a first-hand experience, and they are blessed, too (Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*). Many of us are baptized, as with our youngest soon-to-be baptized member, as infants without having even any knowledge of Jesus, let alone first hand experience. And no one can look at that precious little one and tell me she is not blessed and beloved by God.

For Thomas, this is a holy experience. Seeing and feeling Christ's wounds is a reminder of who is he and of what he stands for: full-hearted, whole-bodied love. I used to wonder why we are so fond of seeing the scars on our sculptures and images of Christ, but now I know. Much like the scars we all bear on our own bodies, Christ's scars are a reminder of a sacred moment. They are holy in and of themselves, part of Jesus's story and part of ours as well.

I'd like to close the sermon today with a blessing. A Blessing of the Scars written by the UCC's own Rev. Dr. Cheryl A Lindsay. As I say this blessing, I invite you to find a scar on your body, or if you cannot reach or don't have

any visible scars, touch your knees or elbows that most of us must have skinned up as children. If you have been particularly hurt emotionally, you can even put your hand over your heart. Hear these words:

Divine Stitcher-

Your healing Spirit encircles us in our times of illness and grief. This Spirit unifies the divides in our skin and comforts the pain in our wounds. We bless the spots of healing on our bodies. May we remember you who sat with us as these scrapes and incisions were tender and each day as they mended. May we see beauty in these marks on our bodies. Amen.