

Second Sunday of Easter

SEE THE SCARS

John 20:19-31

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Analysis by Steven E. Albertin

19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." 24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." 28 Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" 29 Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." 30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples,

which are not written in this book. 31 But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Diagnosis: “Scarred for Death”

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – “A Scarred World”

Life is the process of accumulating scars. The scars remind us of the painful experiences of our past. The scars won't let us forget that life is broken and flawed. We bear scars on our bodies, in our memories, and on our consciences. They remind us that this world is still far from perfect. They remind us of how difficult, if not impossible, it is to escape our past. That is why it took seeing the scars on Jesus' body to convince not only Thomas but also the other ten disciples that Jesus had actually risen from the dead. No one had actually seen Jesus rise from the dead. Therefore, it would take seeing the scars on Jesus' body to connect the post-resurrection Jesus with the pre-resurrection Jesus. It doesn't seem quite fair for the church to have singled out Thomas as the great doubter, since it took seeing the scars on Jesus' body to convince BOTH Thomas AND the other ten that Jesus was risen from the dead. (Maybe Thomas missed Jesus' first appearance because he was having a cigarette or taking the dog for a walk. Thomas only wanted to be convinced by the same thing that convinced the others: the scars.)

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – “A Scarred Heart”

But the problem is more than just being unable to escape the scars and memories of the past. Those painful scars from the past, those memories of our sins and failures, continue to afflict us in the present. Those scars continue to haunt us

undermining our self-confidence, gnawing away at our self-worth, burdening us with guilt, reminding us that the shame and embarrassment of our past sins have deeply scarred our self-understanding and must be dealt with, if we are going to get on with our lives. Thomas's problem was not just his inability to accept the "fact" of Jesus' resurrection, that is, that it had happened. No, his deeper problem was that his heart was so scarred with the guilt of his own shameful abandonment of Jesus in his great hour of need. Thomas needed to be able to believe in his own heart that Jesus/God accepted him and loved him anyway. Thomas needed to believe that Jesus/God was for him and not against him. Thomas' heart was so scarred that such faith was impossible. He needed to be assured of something more than that Jesus was simply alive. If Jesus was really alive, it might not even be good news. It could mean that Jesus has come back to make Thomas and everyone in this world like Thomas pay for the scars they had inflicted upon Jesus. Thomas needed to be assured that not only was Jesus alive but that Jesus would no longer hold the scars on his body, the wounds of crucifixion on his hands, his feet and his side, against Thomas. The scars in Thomas' own heart made such faith impossible.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – “A Scarred Corpse”

Fearful of what a risen Jesus may visit upon him, Thomas prefers to have Jesus remain a scarred corpse. He mistakenly thinks that with Jesus still dead, he is safe. So he demands proof while crossing his fingers that his dare will go unmet. He is terrified of having to meet his scarred Lord face to face. But he is only deluding himself. He is stuck with his fear. Unforgiven, his sins are retained. Even if Jesus hasn't come back, he will still have to live the rest of his life behind locked doors always having to hide his scars, ever fearful of being exposed. Is this any kind of life? This is a living death. He is the one who is the scarred corpse. Whether Jesus is

actually alive or still in the grave makes little difference. He will not be able to escape the judgment of God. He is as good as dead.

Prognosis: “Scarred for Life”

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – “A Scarred Jesus”

A week later when Jesus once again appears to the disciples and the doors were still shut (maybe Thomas is afraid Jesus will show up after all and has convince the other disciples to keep the doors shut?), what is the first thing Jesus does? Jesus takes the initiative with a word of comfort: “Peace be with you.” And immediately he shows Thomas his scars, the scars that were not on a dead corpse but on a living person. The good news is that Jesus/God was not going to let those scars get in the way of Jesus/God loving Thomas. Those scars symbolized the sin of a world that had put Jesus to death. Those scars symbolized the sin of a world Jesus had taken upon himself. Those scars symbolized the judgment that Thomas and this whole unbelieving world had deserved. But now when Jesus shows Thomas those scars, it is clear that Jesus has suffered in his own body the fate that Thomas had deserved. Those scars reminded Thomas that God in Jesus has come to Thomas and all the scarred and broken people of this world to assure them that there is no sin, so shame, no embarrassment, no crime and not even God’s own righteous judgment on their desperate unbelief that could separate them from His love in Jesus.

Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) – “A Scarred Faith”

That is why the scars meant so much to Thomas. That is why he had to see the scars on the living body of Jesus. Thomas had to know that the scars did not thwart the love of God for him. And when he saw those scars on not a dead but a living body and on the body of the One who was not going to reject him but love

him, what else could he say but “My Lord and My God! (You still love me!)” Such faith is scarred because it is the faith of one who needed to know not just that dead people can be raised or that the once dead Jesus is now alive but that God still loves ugly, scarred, stubborn, defiant doubters like Thomas! This is faith in “MY Lord and MY God” and not just in any Lord or any God. Even the Devil believes that Jesus rose from the dead. But the devil does not believe that Jesus rose from the dead . . . FOR HIM! This is why John has ended his Gospel with this dramatic confession of faith. This scarred faith is faith par excellence! It has emerged from desperation, from hiding behind shut doors, from the fear that it will have to pay for the scars it has inflicted on Jesus. It is a faith that, in spite of appearances to the contrary, has chosen to trust the mercy of the scarred but living Jesus.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – “A Scarred Life”

That God has chosen to be scarred and wounded for the sake of the world in Jesus’ crucifixion is news that cannot be muzzled. That God would choose not to get back and get even with those who have so scarred the life and body of his only Son is a story that must be proclaimed. That God has raised Jesus from the dead is a message that must be declared. That someone like Thomas could come to faith like this must be told. “That you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may life in his name” must be written. And so Thomas went on to become one of the great evangelists of the church. Tradition has it that he took the faith as far away as India. And so John wrote this Gospel. And so, ever since the church has been about the business of doing what Jesus did that day when he appeared to Thomas and the disciples: forgiving and retaining sins. And all of this is possible because some have seen the scars not only in the body of Jesus but in the bodies and souls of all the Thomases whose desperate unbelief has been

healed. It is through such witnessing and telling and forgiving that the scars we all bear in our lives, from a past that can never be undone, are transformed. Scars (sins) that we normally we would want to keep hidden and out of sight and therefore like a hidden cancer are able to fester, spread and kill us, we are now able to expose, confess and have forgiven. Peace is conferred. And the scarred life of the sinner/saint flourishes.