

Easter 2 (A)  
April 16, 2023  
Text: John 20:19-31

Pastor Aaron Couch  
First Immanuel Lutheran Church  
Portland, Oregon

When Jesus appeared to Thomas and invited him to touch the mark of the nails in his hands, I wonder what you see in your imagination. I don't think John wants us to imagine bloody, dripping wounds. Instead, I think, John wants us to see that Jesus' wounds are in some way healed, like a scar. These wounds are proof that it really is Jesus, the same one the disciples saw arrested and condemned and put to death. This isn't someone who just happened to look a lot like Jesus. The wounds testify that it really is him and he really has come from beyond death. I wonder if you can see these wounds as a sign of God's love and life-giving power.

These wounds also testify that Jesus isn't a ghost. Whatever it means for Jesus to be on the other side of death, to have been raised by God to new life, it is definitely embodied. Jesus' resurrection body may be very different from how we experience having a body—since Jesus was able to pop into a locked room without bothering with the doors—but this new body is still connected to everything Jesus had been through. He showed them his hands and his side. He showed them his wounds. They were signs of healing and new life.

I've been wondering this week about what Jesus' wounds might have to say to us, and how we might honor those wounds—because certainly we don't want to gawk, or feel pity for Jesus. As I've been wondering, it seems to me that there are three important ways for us to be loving witnesses to Jesus' wounds, three ways we can relate to them and they can be meaningful for us.

First, we think about Jesus' own wounds. When we consider how Jesus was wounded, it was because powerful people wanted to silence him. They wanted to destroy him and destroy his movement. The chief priests in the Jerusalem temple hated Jesus because he called them out for the ways they used the power of the temple to exploit the common people, to steal from them and make themselves rich. So the religious authorities arrested Jesus by night and, in a sham trial, condemned him of blasphemy. The Roman governor was suspicious of anyone who was popular with the crowds. So rather than risk any challenge to Roman power, Pontius Pilate gave the command for Jesus to be brutally tortured and executed in the most cruel, painful and humiliating way possible. That is how powerful people defend their power.

For us, then, to honor Jesus' wounds seems to me to require that God's people have a kind of in-built skepticism about how powerful people use their power for their own benefit, and an automatic suspicion about how poor people and powerless people are silenced and punished. I used to read the newspaper assuming that, if a story told about a defendant pleading guilty to a crime, then that person must actually be guilty. But I've read too many stories about coerced confessions and prosecutorial misconduct and police misconduct and inadequate legal representation to continue believing that. But even more than that, it seems to me that Jesus' wounds invite us to reconsider the emphasis on punishment in our legal system. I wonder whether Jesus' wounds might encourage us to put more emphasis on rehabilitation, and maybe

also restorative justice. I wonder how Jesus' wounds might challenge and change what we think of as justice—because they are signs of transformation and hope.

Second, when we think about the risen Christ appearing with wounds, we need to remember that together we are the body of Christ in this place. And there's a way in which, as a community, we carry wounds that are an important part of being the body of Christ. Let me explain what I mean. Our congregation was founded by Swedish and Norwegian immigrants who came from their Scandinavian homes to the Pacific Northwest. This was a new home for them, and I think it was many ways a very difficult and painful experience. They not only left behind family, native land and native language. Here, they were looked down on, like a lower class of human being. They were exploited for their labor and taken advantage of. Perhaps you've heard some of the stories about what it was like working in the lumber mills or being a domestic worker in one of the big houses in the neighborhood here. Life as an immigrant was really hard.

I believe those painful experiences, those wounds, have helped shape the DNA of this congregation and make it a community that has a heart for people who live in difficult situations. Those wounds have helped make this congregation a community with warm hospitality that really cares about each other. This congregation was instrumental in founding Emanuel Hospital for "the suffering Swedes." In the 1970s, we distributed government surplus cheese. We were a founding member of Northwest Portland Ministries, which became Lift Urban Portland. We hosted the food pantry for years and years, and the Rose Haven Day Shelter for years and years. Members of First Immanuel have served meals to homeless families. Through the pandemic, we dug deeply into antiracism education. Now that we're moving out of the pandemic, and so many things have changed in our city and neighborhood, we're exploring our way forward, trying to figure out where the Spirit is leading us next. In fact, in a couple of weeks, on April 29, we'll be having a congregational retreat, and I think it would be wonderful if you could be part of it. I fully expect that among the ideas for future ministry that we'll talk about will be some that have to do with reaching out to neighbors whose lives are challenging.

There's one more way that Jesus' wounds might speak to us. We are the body of Christ together, and each one of us is part of that risen body. We know that none of us can make it through this life unscathed. We all get wounded in our journey through life. And I think these wounds also can be part of how the risen Christ is at work in the world to bring healing and hope. Again, maybe an example will help picture what I mean. I know people who have lost loved ones to gun violence, and now they are tireless in their work for sensible gun laws. I know parents who have experienced such heartache with children who suffer from mental illness, and now they are relentless in their push for the state to make essential mental health services available for everyone who needs it. I know people who have experienced such pain with alcoholism and addiction in their families, and they are committed to seeking a less punitive and more rehabilitative approach to addiction. I could go on and on. In my own experience, it was the devastating experience of being widowed in my mid-30s that created a kind of openness in my heart, to be aware that I don't know the kind of hidden burdens that are carried by the people I meet. I believe that through all of these kinds of wounds, the risen Christ is able to move through our lives to help us really see other people's wounds, and to be a force

for compassion and connection and healing. I'm convinced that these kinds of wounds need time, they need to become scars, so that we don't just bleed on each other, but instead, can speak from the comfort and strength that we have discovered, that we have received. These wounds are signs of healing and new life.

People of God, we live in a culture that wants everyone to be perfect, everyone's body to be perfect, and vulnerability is a "no-no." I don't believe that cultural impulse is in any way helpful or healthy. But we don't follow culture. We follow Jesus, who was wounded, and now offers his wounded hands and side to us as signs of his love, signs of God's power over hate and fear and death, signs of triumph and victory. Those signs are with us, not just in the imaginative portrayal of the risen Christ above our altar, but also in us, in us as a community and in us as individuals. We carry something of the risen Christ's wounds so that through us the healing power of God can be at work for our world. Thanks be to God. Amen.