

Wounded Healer
Acts 5:27-32; John 20:19-31
April 15, 2007

Jesus' appearance to the disciples as reported in this morning's Gospel reading is full of emotion. It is still Easter Sunday, but in the evening. The sun has set, darkening the sky. In John's gospel only Mary of Magdala experiences Jesus at the garden tomb. The other disciples have not yet encountered him. Mary told them of her experience and proclaimed, "I have seen the Lord." But unlike Luke's gospel where Peter runs to the tomb to look for himself, here the disciples lock themselves in a house, imprisoned by fear. Huddled in the darkness, they jump with every outside noise. They are afraid that the authorities may accuse them of stealing Jesus' body.

Suddenly into their fearful paralysis comes Jesus. He doesn't knock and seek entrance to the bolted doors. He simply appears and stands among them. He greets them with comforting words, "Peace be with you." Fear is met by peace. Into their affliction, grief, and confusion, Christ offers his peaceful presence. He shows them his hands and his side. His hands, of course, were nailed to the cross. His side was pierced with a spear. John is a gospel of signs, so Jesus shows them signs that he is the same one who was crucified. When the disciples receive this greeting and experience Jesus' presence, their fear is transformed into joy. He commissions them, sending them into ministry, breathing on them, as if filling them with the Holy Spirit. It is reminiscent of the breath of life breathed into the first human created. Here the breath of the Holy Spirit revives the immobilized disciples.

Thomas misses out on this powerful experience. We aren't told where he is. Perhaps he is out looking for Jesus so that he can see him as did Mary Magdalene. History has often been unfair to Thomas, calling him "Doubting Thomas," because he wants to see Jesus, including the wounds in his hands and side. He asks for no more than the other disciples have already been given. When Jesus returns, without scolding, he offers Thomas what he needs. He invites Thomas to touch his hands and side. We aren't told whether Thomas does reach out and touch. Perhaps experiencing Jesus' presence was what he needed. Nevertheless, Jesus offers his wounded hand and side. Thomas responds with a declaration of faith, "My Lord and my God."

In sign language, the name for Jesus is signed with a tap in the palm of each hand, indicating the mark of the nails. What a powerful way for deaf persons to know of Jesus, the one who was crucified and who still bears the

marks of the nails in his hands. His suffering differs from theirs in its physical manifestation, but nonetheless, he suffered and he knows the experience of suffering. He shares their hurt and pain.

In Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet* the poet drew a hand with a gentle and compassionate human eye in its palm. This is a traditional Hindu symbol for the healer. "In the Hindu belief the energy centers called chakras, in our palms, connect the hand and heart of the healer and convey the wisdom and energy needed for the healing."¹ The palms of our hands transmit the energy and compassion of the heart.

Jesus' healing touch brought new life to many. The love and kindness that filled his heart were transmitted through his caring hands. Compassion and sensitivity radiated from them so that when he touched people, they felt something of the divine spirit coming through.

Dr. Paul Brand, an orthopedic surgeon, wrote of Jesus' crucified hands. "It hurts me to think of a nail being driven through the center of my hand or my wrist, because I know what goes on there, the tremendous complex of tendons and nerves and muscles and blood vessels. It's impossible to drive a spike through without crippling it. The thought of those healing hands being crippled reminds me of what Christ was prepared to endure. In that act, he identified himself with all the deformed and crippled human beings in the world. Not only was he able to endure poverty with the poor, weariness with the tired, but clawed hands with those crippled."

He goes on to reflect on the resurrected hands of Christ. He kept the wounds of humanity so that he could continue to understand the needs of those suffering.²

"During the sixteenth century when the Black Death was a terrible reality for many, an artist painted an almost unbearably profound image of Christ in his woundedness. In 1516, Matthias Grunewald painted what is now known as the Isenheim Altarpiece for the hermits of Saint Anthony, who cared for victims of the plague. In the central Crucifixion panel of this work, the figure of Christ on the Cross is enormous, twice the size of his companions. Christ's suffering is graphic, and grotesque: his flesh is green, covered with festering sores, his face and limbs are contorted with agony. Grunewald has, in fact, depicted Christ as dying of the plague. In the foreground (lest we miss the meaning) is a lamb, its eyes on Jesus, bleeding from a cut in its breast into a chalice. The message is starkly clear: in the bleeding wounds of Christ lie our hope and our salvation.

"The men and women who died with this image before them five hundred years ago were not cured of the plague by their faith in Christ, who

suffered with them. They were not spared the horrors of that death, did not have their mortal illness ‘fixed’ or eliminated by the crucified one any more than Jesus escaped his own end. They did, however, have the transforming opportunity not only to know themselves companioned by Christ crucified, but also to experience their death as radical healing.”³

The presence of the risen Christ does not necessarily cure disease, but the presence cares for us in the midst of difficulty. Christ’s companionship in our pain is often the source of healing, but not necessarily recovery. Jesus invites the disciples and us to see his wounds in order to assure us that he shares our sorrow and pain.

Suffering does not always lead to compassion. Wounds long neglected or denied can fester and make us bitter. Wounded people often wound others. The only release they find from their pain is in making others feel miserable. But this is not the way of Christ. His personal suffering solidifies his compassion, enabling him to experience the pain of others even more deeply. He does not lash out at Thomas for expressing his need to see Jesus’ hands and side. He reaches out with understanding and offers Thomas what he needs.

There is great value in allowing others to companion us through the struggles of life. Support groups, therapists, the community of faith, and friends can be a source of strength for the journey. They remind us that we are not alone.

Today is a day of remembrance of the Holocaust. Between 1933 and 1945, six million Jewish men, women, and children were killed in the Shoah of Nazi Germany, nearly two thirds of the European Jewish population. In addition, nearly five million others – homosexuals, Poles, Gypsies, Russians, and other “undesirables” – had their lives brutally ended by the technology of death. Unfortunately some today are denying that such atrocities ever occurred. We need to stand in solidarity with our Jewish brothers and sisters and other victims of oppression, to acknowledge their suffering and that of their ancestors.

Because of their experience, the Jewish people deeply feel the suffering of the people of Darfur. “At least 400,000 people have been killed; more than 2 million innocent civilians have been forced to flee their homes and now live in displaced-persons camps in Sudan or in refugee camps in neighboring Chad; and more than 3.5 million men, women, and children are completely reliant on international aid for survival. Not since the Rwandan genocide of 1994 has the world seen such a calculated campaign of displacement, starvation, rape, and mass slaughter.”⁴

This kind of solidarity in suffering is one of the gifts of faith communities and of the human family. We all suffer in some form or another. We can choose how to use our suffering. We can allow our pain to engulf us or to integrate it into our lives for our own healing and perhaps for that of others. Our own pain and suffering unite us in the depths of the human condition. This is the way of the Wounded Healer, “a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3 KJV).

In a poignant moment in C.S. Lewis’ *Narnia* chronicles, the young boy Digory is heartbroken by the realization that his mother is dying, and that he can do nothing to save her. He raises his despairing face to the great lion Aslan, and is startled to see “great shining tears” in Aslan’s eyes.

“They were such big, bright tears compared with Digory’s own that for a moment he felt as if the Lion must really be sorrier about his Mother than he was himself.

‘My son, my son,’ said Aslan, ‘I know. Grief is great. Only you and I in this land know that yet. Let us be good to one another.’”⁵

The suffering and the wounds of our world are great. Let us be good to one another, that healing might come to all.

¹ Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D., *Kitchen Table Wisdom* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), p. 249.

² Philip Yancey and Dr. Paul Brand, *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made* (Zondervan, 1997).

³ Deborah Smith Douglas, "Wounded and Healed," *Weavings* Vol. XV, No. 2, March/April 2000, p. 18.

⁴ <http://www.savedarfur.org/pages/background>. Retrieved April 14, 2007.

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), p. 142.

Rev. Lori Best Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church
Lafayette, CA