

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
2nd Sunday of Easter
April 23, 2017

Scarred for Life

John 20:19-31

Have you ever walked alone through a darkened graveyard?

It takes a little nerve.

I used to run through a cemetery on my running route in Pittsburgh,
but that was always during the day.

But did it dawn on you last week
that Mary Magdalene was walking alone through a graveyard
before the sun had come up?

As John says,
while it was still dark.

She even saw a stranger there in the darkness and spoke to him —
at least, she thought it was a stranger.

This is the stuff of B-rate horror movies,
the ones where you're watching and urging the characters,
"No, don't do it! Don't go into the graveyard!"

But Mary went.

And the contrast is stark
between that scene last Sunday,
of Mary proceeding resolutely into a darkened graveyard,
and the scene this Sunday,
of the disciples, huddled together inside a locked room,
trembling in the fear of their desperate situation.

Fear and grief have paralyzed the friends of Jesus.

Fear and grief can do that.

They can lock you inside of yourself.
Make you hyper-vigilant, self-protective,
wary of every human interaction.

When we look at the world and it seems there are enemies around every corner,
when we do not know whom we can trust,
when everyone's motives are suspect,
life can become a prison of fear.

The doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews.
The upper room had become an upper tomb.

But if we have learned anything from the Gospel of John

it is that **darkness and tombs are where Jesus does his best work**,
his most important work,
his most profoundly life-giving work.

And so it is here, on this evening of the first day of the week.
in this locked room where the fear is so thick it's hard to breathe,
Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."
And he showed them his scars.

We Protestants aren't so much into scars and crucifixes.
We prefer to proclaim that "the cross stands empty to the sky"
and indeed it does.
But John's proclamation of the resurrection does not do away with the crucifixion,
as if it never happened.

Jesus the risen Lord is always the Lord who was crucified.

He is scarred for life — scarred for eternity, really.
Jesus' scars have become a sign of all he came to do for the world.
Jesus' scars are the reason God sent the Son into the world.

And it is upon seeing his scars that the disciples rejoice.
Words of peace are glib when they come from one who has not suffered.
Words of peace carry no weight if the one speaking them has no power to deliver.
And Jesus' words of peace do not bring rejoicing to the disciples,
until they behold his scars and know that
this, indeed, is the one who met death and overcame it.

Jesus establishes that he is, in fact,
the One who suffered and died on the cross,
the One who entered fully into the darkness of the world,
the One who bears the scars of the curse of all humanity, all creation.
And in doing so, Jesus makes the locked doors of the disciples' fear irrelevant.
Because he is the One who once said, *I am the door.*

Jesus opens the closed doors of the disciples' stifled vision,
he rolls away the stone of their entombed imagination,
and he sends them back out into the world.

As the Father has sent me, so I send you.
When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them,
"Receive the Holy Spirit."

The English translation, *He breathed on them*, is probably not the best.
A better translation would be, *He breathed into them*.
And this is meant to recall our minds to another moment of God's *breathing into*.

Remember how the Gospel of John began?

In the beginning was the Word.
And the Word was with God.
All things came into being through him.

John recalls our minds to the first day of creation in Genesis,
when, in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

It is no incidental detail that Jesus is buried in a garden.
Nor that when he is first beheld by Mary, she mistakes him for the gardener.
There are few if any incidental details in John.

John wants us to remember that first garden that God planted in Eden,
in the east, where God put the man that he had formed.
And it was there in that first garden that God's first *breathing into* happened,
*when the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground,
and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life;
and the man became a living being.*

**And now Jesus, the newly created man, who comes to life in a garden,
breathes that breath of life into the disciples,
and remakes them.**

Their dreams had been reduced to dust,
but God breathes life into dust.
God raises up new life and new hope and new purpose from the ashes of our loss.
God breathes into the disciples,
and they become living beings once again.

It is certainly worth saying today, on this day after Earth Day 2017,
that it is not just human life that God raises up on Easter morning.

On Easter, God was reconstituting all creation.

As Paul tells us,

It is the whole creation that groans and waits with eager longing.
It was not just for the sake of human life that Jesus was raised.
He comes back to life in a garden,
and calls all humanity back to life in that same garden,
the garden of the world God has created.

**Our relationship to the soil and the plants and the animals
and the air and the water of creation
is recreated in Jesus' resurrection.**

Which brings us back to what Jesus says to the disciples
as he breathes the breath of life — the Holy Spirit — into them:
As the Father has sent me, so I send you.

Just as his new life is for the sake of all creation,
so is theirs.

Jesus sends us to be the caretakers of creation
God always meant us to be.

But perhaps you are saying to yourself,
Well, this all sounds very nice and poetic sitting amidst these stained glass windows,
with everyone dressed up in their Sunday best.
But what does it really mean
given some of the really unpoetic circumstances of my life?

Are you dealing with real fears that come from real threats?

Are you weighed down by grief because you have lost something or someone precious to you?

Are you stuck in a rut of your own making,
or a rut into which you have been forced by no fault of your own?

Have you just been through too much,
suffered too much pain,
been burned in too many relationships,
seen too much corruption,
been disillusioned by too many failed institutions?

Are you too smart to hope in something as ephemeral
as a breath of life?
I mean, what is really possible in this world
of lies and betrayal and power and greed?

If this is where you are today then you have good company here.

**On the day that Jesus came and stood among them,
someone was missing.**

You...

...and Thomas.

Thomas shows up late. He missed the first time Jesus appeared.

I'm guessing he was on Greenville County School Board schedule...

...probably he was on Spring Break...during the most Holy Week of the Christian Year...
so instead of being with his community of faith on the big days,
he was...

...at the beach, or something.

But now he has shown up, saying, huh?!?

Resurrection, my foot!

I won't believe it until I see it.

I won't believe it because my scars are too real.

I won't believe it because I'm afraid to believe.

I have been hurt too many times.

I'm scarred for life,

and I won't let down my defenses for empty promises
anymore.

Thomas gets a bum rap, you know.

All he is asking for is the same experience, the same encounter
that has convinced the other disciples.

He wants the same new relationship with Jesus that they are claiming to have.

He is no more a doubter than the rest of them,
and no more than we are.

He really is scarred for life.

And that is exactly the point of Jesus' showing up here,
in his crucified body, now risen...

**...to show Thomas, and the other disciples, and us,
that it is when we are in the darkest and most painful moments,
when we feel the pain of our scars most deeply,
that the risen Jesus is closest too us.**

God became flesh, and flesh can be torn.
Flesh bleeds.
Flesh hurts.
And that's right where Jesus goes.

There is a new show that is trending on Netflix these days
called *13 Reasons Why*.

You may have heard of it.

If you are a teenager, you have almost certainly heard of it.

If you are a parent of teenagers, you need to have heard of it.

It's a story about Hannah Baker, a high school girl who has committed suicide.
In fact, if you Google the name Hannah now,
the first auto-completion on Google is no longer Montana, but Baker.
The series was released on March 31st — 22 days ago,
and it has already become a phenomenon in youth culture.

I must let you know,

the rating, "TV-MA (Mature Audience)," is for good cause.

It's not so much the strong language;

kids hear this kind of language every day at school.

But the content is indeed mature, intense, heavy, scary...

...and reflective of what our young people deal with to varying degrees,
whenever they go to school and engage in social life.

If your youth are watching *13 Reasons Why*, you need to know it.

And you need to watch it, too, and talk to them about it.

In the story, Hannah Baker made tape recordings about 13 people
who are the 13 reasons why she took her own life.

She couldn't find one reason stay alive.

Hannah was scarred.

Scarred for life by some really awful experiences.

And she, like Thomas, asked,

"Why should I believe? Why should I hope?

Why should I trust life?"

It was for Hanna and for Thomas and for you and for me
that God became flesh in Jesus Christ.

And this is why Jesus showed up in that locked room,
and showed his scars to his disciples.

Not...NOT...merely so they could have hope for a life beyond this one.

NOT simply to show them that God can resuscitate a body,
or raise up a corpse, or provide life on the other side of the grave.

**But to show them that there is a life worth living in this world, right now,
on this side of the grave.**

Jesus breathes the breath of life into the disciples, and where does he send them?

Not to heaven!

He sends them back out into the world, out into the garden of creation,
to till it and to keep it
and to believe in the life that can grow there.

Abundant life here and now.

**That is why the Father sent the Son,
and why the Son sends us
in the power of the Spirit.**

Jesus was scarred for life...

...Scarred for our life...

...that we might have it

...and have it to the full.

Thanks be to God.