

**John 20:19-29; Isaiah 26:17-18a.**

**Adam G. L. Bartholomew.**

**Christ Church, Poughkeepsie, New York**

**April 23, 2006**

“Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails and thrust my finger in the mark of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I won’t believe!”

What an odd for Thomas to say in response to the incredible claim by the other disciples, “We’ve seen the Lord!” Why would that have anything to do with Jesus being alive? Why not simply, “I need to see him for myself!” Or “I need to touch him and feel flesh and bone so I know that what you saw was not an apparition”? Why the need to put his fingers in the nail prints and his hand in the spear gash? Is this just hyperbolic rhetoric on Thomas’s part? A poetic flare for naming the physical in an unforgettable image? Why, in order to be demonstratively alive, should Jesus have to bear the marks of death?

The resurrection stories have been a source of endless fascination throughout Christian history. Some people have taken them as unambiguous and convincing accounts that Jesus’ physical body came back to life – convincing for all but the “Doubting Thomases” among us, that is. But there has to be more to it, even for those who understand them in such a straightforward fashion: if this is Jesus’ physical body, it is obviously his physical body with a difference: it can pass through doors, and in a short while – Acts says 40 days – it will disappear without a trace – Luke and Acts say it will ascend to heaven.

The apostle Paul struggles to explain this sameness with a difference in a long passage about physical bodies and spiritual bodies, seeds and plants that grow from them, and syllogisms that leave the mind reeling rather than satisfied.

The stories of Jesus’ resurrection are on the order of the doctrine of the Trinity: holding together in tension things that seem naturally to fly apart. Both of these doctrines should actually have special appeal to the non-linear, associative minds of post-modern culture.

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What does riding a horse rounding up cattle have to do with smoking a Marlboro? Who knows! But putting the two together vividly connects them and gets us wondering.

So what does tactile connection with Jesus' crucifixion wounds have to do with believing that he is alive? As I began pondering this story for the nth time this week, and after diving into several rational, historical and theological discussions of Jesus' resurrection, I stepped back and soften the focus of my gaze, and asked myself, What fascinates me about this story? What leaps out at me and gets my imagination going? And what emerged was this question, Why the focus on Jesus' physical wounds in response to this incredible report that the other disciples had seen the Lord?

Now there is no single, clear answer to that question. More than one commentator has actually addressed it. One proposal is that the wounds establish Jesus' identity: This is clearly the same person as the disciples had known before his crucifixion, since his body exhibits the wounds they know accompanied his death. Another proposal is that the continuing presence of the wounds in Jesus' body keep before us graphically that God triumphed over even the most cruel and horrifying evil that human beings can commit. A third proposal is that the wounds show that, in resurrected life, Jesus' body carries with it Jesus' earthly history. His earthly life, and especially his experience of death, is not left behind when God restores him to life and he is present among us again. This helps set the New Testament view of resurrection more firmly in the Jewish tradition of according the material world enduring value in contrast to the view widespread among non-Jews that the material world is, in its transience character, something to be left behind if we are to be able to connect with the eternal. Most Jews affirmed that the material is not to be left behind but is to be redeemed. The resurrection of a wounded physical body is an instance of that material redemption.

What strikes me is that this image of Jesus alive again but bearing the wounds is a provocative image for contemplating the relationship between our own woundedness and

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any sort of new life that may lie in our future – not only our future after our physical death but our future at any point in our life when we find ourselves wounded.

Someone was telling me a short time again how difficult it has been to have suffered a deep loss and then have a friend say, “That was 6 months ago; get over it!” That may even be a message we give ourselves. It suggests that the path to new life is to eliminate the wounds we have suffered. If we are to regain our vigor, we have to have plastic surgery so that our wounds are erased and neither we nor others have to deal with them anymore. Some people get impatient when we keep bringing up the loved one we have lost, the divorce we have suffered, the unjust way someone or institution treated us. They want us to cut it from our script and trash it. They don’t want to hear about it anymore.

The image of Jesus, bearing the wounds of his crucifixion even in his resurrection, suggest strongly that we don’t need to erase the wounds of the past in order to find new life. Our wounds shape us into new persons. Resurrected life for us will not erase them so that we can move on as though they never happened. Resurrected life will restore to life us as persons who have suffered. The resurrection of the crucified is the image of one who is alive despite his wounds, whose life has been transformed by his wounds. The promise of resurrection is the promise that, whatever our wounds, we will be restored to life. But we will somehow be different persons, transformed persons. And our stories of our lives will be retold and indelibly recount how that pain-filled transformation came about.

If I may be personal, I am a different person because I have suffered divorce. Some of the pain of that will never go away. It is for most of the time under the surface; it emerges at odd times. The story of my divorce is complex. It has gone through many revisions. I have been hurt by some I loved deeply, and I have hurt her in turn. I am more complex than I was because of this experience. There are negatives, and thankfully some of those negatives have a positive side to them. I am sympathetic towards people in

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pain, all sorts of pain, to a degree I was not before I experienced deep pain in this way myself.

If there is to be new life, it may be either not possible or not healthy to erase the wounds of the past. If there is to be new life, we need to work with the wounds of the past until they effect a transformation or become transformed themselves as we weave them into the tapestries of our lives.

Not all wounds are the same. Some are minor, even the product of my imagination, as when I feel slighted by someone who in fact had good reason to do what I interpreted to be a slight and did not intend it as a slight at all. Others are so awful that it is morally offensive to move on by leaving them behind. Today we are remembering the Armenian genocide by the Ottoman Empire in Turkey during World War I. One of the most difficult aspects of that event for Armenians is Turkey's refusal to acknowledge what they did.

Indeed, the wounds we inflict are as much a part of who we have become as the wounds we suffer. When we do not acknowledge what we have done, we are in great danger of doing it again, blind to our own capacity for evil, or of condemning others with a harshness that would be at least tempered if we were able to see ourselves in them.

The resurrected Jesus, bearing the wounds of crucifixion in his resurrected body, is an image rich in possible meaning for us. God can triumph even over our worst. The God who returns to us is the very God we tortured. God confronts us in God's woundedness; God does not let us off the hook about what we have done, because that would deny a serious part of who we are. No matter how terrible we have been, God does not refuse to confront us. God has the courage and the fortitude for the hard work of reconciliation that comes only by working through what we have done to God. God models for us and promises to be with us as we struggle with whether or not to face those who have wounded us.

The resurrection of Jesus' body may well be as impossible a thing for us to believe as it was for Thomas. It is not particularly helpful for the church to respond, "Well, you just have to take it on faith." I believe it was the 4<sup>th</sup> century theologian Tertullian who declared, "I believe because it is absurd." If all belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus is about is the ability to accept something scientific impossibility, it is, in the words of Isaiah, like being pregnant and bringing forth the wind. It is in the category of a curiosity such as we find in Ripley's Believe It Or Not or in those tabloids we read while waiting in the grocery line. A source of entertaining astonishment, but who cares? Who really even believes it.

Even if we find it impossible to believe, the image of Jesus' resurrected, wounded body is potent with meaning. That meaning is lost if we deface the stories as told in order to explain the resurrection experience of Jesus' disciples as mere apparition and delusion and the empty tomb as a fiction to support that delusion. What we lose is an affirmation of the enduring significance of the physical, of the things we do and experience in the body, and especially the wounds we suffer and those we inflict. If we can, to borrow a phrase from William James, bring ourselves at least to suspend our disbelief at least for a time, we may find ourselves in a place fertile in meaning that will bring forth riches for our life in the body throughout our alternately joy-filled and pain-drenched lives.