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John 20:19-31
The Wounds in His Hands

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." ²⁰When he had said this, he showed them *his hands* and his side. (John 20:19-20, RSV)

In her college days, my wife Carol was an Art and Theatre major. She tells me that in one of her art classes in those days, she was required to paint a self-portrait. She says that instead of doing a painting of her face, she painted her hands. She has always believed that people's hands can say as much about them as their faces can.

Carol has beautiful hands. They are part of the grace with which she presides at the liturgy. Her hands are long and slender. Carol's hands-in-motion are a delight for me, they are so gentle, so skillful, so graceful. You can indeed learn a lot about Carol simply by watching her hands.

My grandfather's hands too told a story -- a story of a farmer and fisherman, used to using his hands. I still remember him coming in from the field, washing his rough, old, strong hands with Lava soap in the wash basin before sitting down for supper. Those were not the hands of a delicate man.

On that first Easter evening so long ago, Jesus suddenly stood in the midst of his disciples and showed them his hands. I imagine them to be the hands of a working man, since he was known as the "carpenter's son," and was no doubt used to the wood plane and saw, along with the bumps and bruises and splinters and scars that come with carpentry work. But that is just imagining. The Bible does not really describe the hands of Jesus, *except* for this one detail: his hands were wounded. They had had spikes pounded through them. And in this morning's Gospel story, we learn that the hands of Jesus retain their wounds. Jesus invites Thomas to put his finger on the wounds of his hands and to put his hands in our Lord's side where the spear thrust had worked its damage.

Our church's altarpiece gets this right. I have seen this by way of some close-up photographs of the hands of Jesus. If we could get close to those hands of the central statue there, we would see the mark of the nails in them.

That Jesus retains his wounds is an important matter to him. He shows his wounds to his disciples. He is deliberate about it. He bids Thomas to touch his wounds with his own finger. His wounds are not something he lays aside, now that he is risen, as "Master Jack lays aside his coat," as Luther used to say. It is an important matter to Jesus that his disciples take it in that he retains his wounds,

and if it is important to Jesus, it is important for you and me too. His wounds have much to do with the consolations of the Gospel.

I believe that the wounds of the resurrected Jesus offer two kinds of comfort to us: a comfort of *sympathy* and a comfort of *intercession*. Let me speak of them in turn.

One commentator observed that if you and I lived in the Middle Ages, we might find ourselves taking much comfort in the idea that Jesus retains his wounds.¹ Medieval life was vulnerable, and death was often visible and horrible. If we lived in a world where thousands of people, even hundreds of thousands, died of Black Plague, with sores and death rattle, where battles were fought not at distances, but up close with swords and daggers and bloody wounds, where medicine and surgery themselves were often brutal and barbaric, then the thought that Jesus still bears in his body the marks of the Cross could comfort us by way of trust in his sympathy.

But we do not really need to journey to the Middle Ages to see and to suffer wounds. Still, in our modern world, we suffer. Still we are wounded. Modern medicine and science are wonderful, yet they do not entirely spare us from suffering and weakness. Still, people fall and break their hips. Still, people suffer accidents and bear the marks of surgery. Still people go hungry and homeless. Hearts still get broken, and people still get betrayed. We too are assaulted in mind, body, and spirit, just as medieval people were and Jesus long before them.

You and I know young people who are unemployed. They are educated, talented, and good-hearted. They would make wonderful employees, but the job market is thin. We know elderly folks whose strength is declining, whose finances are slipping and maybe their powers of memory too. We know middle-age people who are overburdened with responsibilities, pressures, and debt. There are people who are hurting and who could well cry out, "Jesus you must save me, else there is no one else who can!"

About such a prayer wrung from the desperate heart, we should believe two things: First, that Jesus hears the prayer. His ears are very keen to hear even the faintest cry unto him. And second, he sympathizes with our plight, whatever it is. He need only glance down at the wounds in his hands to be reminded of how tough life can be in this fallen world.

Think, then, of the wounds of Jesus as visible evidence of all kinds of troubles that you might know, but which *he* also knows. Think of those divine wounds as but the tip of the iceberg of the sorrows Christ knew and which you might know too. Bird of the air have their nests and foxes have their holes, but the Son of Man had nowhere to lay his head. He was homeless and dependent upon the kindness of others. His sweet preaching touched few of the hearts of the powerful, and he was opposed by them. He was misunderstood even by his disciples, and in the end, he was betrayed by one and abandoned by all. Reviled, he reviled not in return.

¹ From a fine, devotional newsletter called *Coram Deo*, April 2010, in the lead article by The Rev. Steven K. Gjerde.

Mocked and spit upon, he opened not his mouth. Wounded and pierced, he called not for the angelic legions to rescue him and smite in return. And in the end, he too knew the depths of desperation, such that he cried out, “My God, my God, why hast thou *forsaken* me.” If you have ever felt forsaken in life, think, then, of the wounds of Christ, know that he sympathizes with you and know that he is determined to make all these things work together for your good.

Holy Scripture invites us to take comfort in our faith that Jesus remains acquainted with our human ways and sorrows. It is a spiritual discipline to which we are invited: to ponder the wounds of Christ and in thinking on them, to be encouraged:

¹⁵For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:15-16, KJV)

Again,

For because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted. (Hebrews 2:18, RSV)

As long as this old world turns, Jesus knows by personal experience, all the way to the wounds in his body, the suffering that you might be going through even now. So, that is the first comfort of the wounds: a comfort of sympathy.

The other comfort is what I call a comfort of intercession. This is the good news that the wounds of Jesus are a kind of shelter for us. Imagine yourself to be frightened by a bear in the forest. You know that there is a log cabin ahead. You will be safe if you can get there. So you run with all your might. Your heart beats fast, you pump your legs and arms. You are spurred on by what you have heard about bears: that though they are heavy and seem to lumber along, they in fact can move very fast. If you do not hurry, you are not going to make it. So you run and you pray for God’s mercy. And you make it into the cabin and slam the heavy door shut behind you. That is welcome shelter. That is a crucial refuge.

Even more so are the wounds of Christ, for he points to those wounds in intercession for us and prays, “Father, forgive. Father, save!” We Lutherans love to sing “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” Indeed, he is a mighty fortress. Better than slamming the door of some log cabin. And he is such a fortress for us because the wounds of Christ protect us.

That is the drama of the sacraments. In the holy sacraments, this same Jesus Christ includes you and me, late-born though we are in this twenty-first century. We were not there at the cross when Jesus first began his great intercessory prayer: “Father forgive.” But in the holy sacraments, we are, as it were, transported back to Golgotha, to the foot of the Cross, and we are incorporated into the Church --

into that crowd there upon whom Christ gazed and for whom he gave his body and his blood.

You are baptized, and if not, I hereby invite you to come to me or to some pastor and begin your preparations for Baptism. Christ gave his body and his blood for you and me and is willing to point to his wounds as the basis of his continual intercession for us. Christ himself, then, is our mighty fortress against sin, death, and the devil, and to him belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.