

“A Living Hope”
By Rev. Ridgley Joyner
Acts 2:14a, 22-32; Psalm 16 & 1 Peter 1:3-9
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If you ask my parents about raising me, they will claim I was a rambunctious child. That I lived life WIDE OPEN...with not the best coordination. If you ask them today, they will probably tell you not much has changed. As a result, I have many scars as an adult. Some have faded over time, but it's always my favorite ice breaker game: “Pick a scar and tell the story about it or what it represents to you” because I have a lot of good stories.

I suspect some parents, teachers, aunts and uncles in the room know all too well the “lemme show you my boo boo” stage of the children in our lives. Especially with such warm weather lately, unlimited time outside for play means an influx of scraped knees, scraped elbows, cuts or goose eggs on the forehead.

I have this one scar—a very large one on my knee that I have come to be particularly proud of (?) I suppose you could say. My friend calls it the “shark bite scar” because it literally looks like it could have been from a shark attack. It actually is from a bike wreck I had on a drawbridge. I'll leave the gory details out, but the scar is noticeable and boy does it tell a story.

Since 2011, Will and I have participated with a bike ride called “A Ride to Remember” for the Alzheimer's Association. It is a 252+ mile bike ride from Greenville, SC to Charleston, SC every July. It started in 2008 with a dream of a son from Media, PA whose mother got diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease. He wanted to do more than write a check, so he organized a bike ride fundraiser. What began as a ride with 21 cyclists raising \$15,000, is now an event that draws 350+ Cyclists raising at least \$500,000 every year for the Alzheimer's Association to fund research and to help caregivers.

Most cyclists on the ride will tell you that what brings us together is our drive to end Alzheimer's Disease and a love for our folks affected. What keeps us together, what keeps us coming back is each other. The journey is long, challenging, and it's hot. it's hot. But these strangers, we become united in an experience and are bonded to one another in ways we never really imagined. These folks we ride with every year are our family.

Every year on Day 3, the organizers of the ride make their morning announcement that includes the “Ridgley rule”: At mile 248 You must stop, dismount, and walk across the metal drawbridge on your way into Charleston. A rule that felt and still feels like a huge inconvenience to so many cyclists. A rule that we abide by for the safety of the others around us. Because my biggest scar, tells a story.

It tells a story of young woman in 2012 who was triumphantly riding her bike in a police escort on a sunny summer July afternoon in Charleston, about to finish the longest bike ride I had ever done. Three days in, I was sunburned, sweaty, sore, and so excited to see the finish line at the bottom of the cooper river bridge in Mount Pleasant. Behind the police car we rode side by side-

my newfound friend Laurie that had been with me every pedal stroke. We had talked about everything. I mean I knew her life story, her daughter's life story and she knew mine. We pushed each other up the hills and encouraged each other when the shade was nowhere to be found. Laurie and I were on cloud 9, until that cloud broke and a torrential downpour cornered us on a metal bridge that instantly got slippery. I don't remember much but what I do remember is screaming Will's name and finding myself in the arms of Laurie, surrounded by Jim and Susan and Doug and Tracey...people I had only met three days prior reassuring me, focusing me on how safe I was—calling 911, calling Will, getting me safe to a hospital.

What ensued was me being brought into the ER only to be cared for by a nurse tech who I went to high school with and operated on by the leading orthopedic oncologist in the state who was coincidentally on call that evening. That night, I was carried into Will's nephew's bed by Will's brother and sister, and every few hours she woke up to give me pain meds, help me get comfortable. For the next week, Will's mom and his sister bathed me, fed me, cared for me. It was a humbling experience to say the least. That experience changed my life.

Scars. We all have them—and some tell stories. Maybe not all tell great stories, but stories nonetheless. Scars are what we see that remind us of an event, or a moment in time for us—of people who were there, the doctors that cared for us, our recovery. The memories may fade, but what we “see” are the scars, and with them the story.

For some of us our biggest scars might not be visible. Because some experiences, they too leave scars. Some might be really scary or tragic like losing a child, getting diagnosed with a chronic illness or cancer, an end of a relationship.

Some might feel minor, yet the scar still shows after all these years. These are our emotional scars, or feelings that keep returning to us—especially when trauma marches into our life once more unannounced—especially in times like a pandemic. They may not be visible to others, but we see them. Sometimes we see them every day.

Patrick shared last week that this might be the most authentic easter experience we have. I have been reflecting on that idea a lot since we have begun our Covid-19 journey. I have never really looked at it this way, but the Easter story has a much darker side to me now—Today, a mere 8 days after the resurrection, we are invited into the shadows of our alleluia's: into Thomas's experience of the Resurrected Jesus.

Thomas is mentioned here and there in the gospels, and he seems to be painted as a realist—an honest follower of Christ. He was one of the first to drop everything and follow Jesus the Christ. He loves the Lord, but he, like us needs a bit of certainty. Like us, he wonders about the future and asks the question at the Last Supper—Lord how do we know the way if we don't know where we are going? And today, a week after Christ is supposedly raised, we see a grieved and traumatized Thomas not taking his friend's word for it. He needs to see Jesus. He needs to touch the marks in his hands and feet, in his side—he needs to see those scars to believe the story.

The gospel of John focuses a lot on this idea of “seeing” not just physically with our eyes, but also seeing as coming to truly understand something.

For this reason we see a big focus on Jesus performing miracles and signs in the gospel—these are visible ways for us to “see” Jesus, come to believe in him, and have life in his name.

I think it is interesting, this idea of “seeing” because in many ways we are like Thomas in the beginning of this passage. Thomas has only heard that Jesus has resurrected, and he isn’t buying this Easter story until he sees Jesus.

1 Peter tells us that instead of being first hand witnesses to the miracles we read of in scripture, that we inherit something else—we inherit this living hope through the resurrection of Jesus—that even though we don’t see him, we love him, and even though we haven’t seen him, we believe.

And yet, in the midst of being heirs of Christ’s living hope, we will still face trials Peter writes. In the midst of all that is happening this week, it is easy to identify with Thomas. A sheep of God’s own fold, looking to see God in the world.

We are invited to believe the Easter Story as it has been told to us. While we don’t get to physically see the risen Lord, the cloth laid in the tomb, the stone rolled away, we do get to see Easter in our own way. Through familiar hymns that we sing year after year, Easter Lilies, the new life erupting from God’s creation, family feasts, pictures in our Easter “best”. Shouting “He is Risen Indeed!”

But this year we may not even have “seen” that Easter either.

What does it look like to proclaim “He is Risen” when what we know to be the way we experience the Easter story is no longer available to us?

It can feel impossible to celebrate such new life when it seems like death has the last word these days.

We, like Thomas, are desperately needing to see Jesus in this mess for it to be Easter.

I have always taken this passage to be about Thomas’s doubt, but this week I read it, and I immediately saw something different.

Jesus appears and invites Thomas to experience and “see” the Easter story anew, in a different way.

Jesus invites him to see the resurrection by looking at, by touching a visible reminder of the pain that Jesus endured-his scars.

Thomas sees Jesus, sees the resurrecting hope of the Easter story by looking at his scars.

The visible thing that tells a story.

That Christ suffered pain and that was real.

Jesus died a painful, isolating and traumatic death.

And Christ conquered the worst of it *for us*.

God knows these emotional scars.

So perhaps “seeing” the easter story this year dwells in our pain, our isolation, our trauma, our fear, because that is precisely where resurrection is happening. That is precisely what God endured so that we might know God is with us in our suffering.

Our psalmist is reflecting this morning on those very things—those experiences and the faithfulness of god that is woven within it. Here we see that in the midst of trauma, grief, pain, God endures.

That being claimed by God doesn’t mean a life free from scars. It means that scars remind us that God inhabited the darkness with the psalmist.

Scars are what we see that remind us of something that happened, particularly to us. It represents the pain of what *was*—those scars show *that* suffering as we knew it *didn’t prevail*. What we are left with might be courage, wisdom, resilience, or if we are honest with ourselves some scars leave us with fear, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, or grief.

For me in particular my scar story thwarted me into experiencing what it was like to be taken care of by all these people who weren’t necessarily my parents (I was only about 23 at the time). It was a humbling experience and it taught me how important your village is—and how God puts people around you for a time when you need them most.

It also pulled me into an experience of trauma that I had never really endured before—I had to learn coping skills and work through fear of things like bridges, especially those over water. That experience brought forth resilience I didn’t realize I had. That experience raised up *caregivers* and *cheerleaders* I didn’t know I had.

When we see the scars on Jesus’s hands, when we see the scars in Jesus’s side—we are reminded that God feels our pain but also that God will lift us up from that suffering. You see, scars may be a visible reminder of what was, but they are also the sign of the healing that took place. That God’s resurrecting love brings us out on the other side of our suffering. and that God still abides.

And that is the Easter Story that we inherit—the story that we “see” out in the world even if we aren’t worshipping together in the sanctuary, even if we didn’t have our typical Easter traditions.

We stand here today in what seems like a world full of death celebrating that death doesn’t get the ultimate victory. That our god suffered the depths of human suffering, and reigned victorious.—and that Easter story lives on and sings as loud and as long as the birds sing outside our windows—for when we are locked away in our homes in isolation desperately waiting for that Easter hope to show up—Jesus appears, brings forth the peace that surpasses all understanding, he leans in and invites us to experience it anew--a resurrection that is happening around us day by day through God suffering with and for us.

That is the hope we inherit—that our God is a God who is scared with us, who grieves with us, and who doesn't abandon us in our doubt or unbelief but rather invites us into a new way of seeing the resurrection unfold in the world. As we see the suffering of the world in the wounds of our Christ, may we shout with joy, with hope, Thomas's confession, "My Lord, and My God"!

There is no doubt that we will come on the other side of this with scars—emotional ones, financial ones, and maybe even some boo-boo's from too much time playing outside. But that is the good news. That we will come on the other side of this. That there will be healing and that this too will pass, and that God is with us every step of the way. God's resurrecting living hope will endure making us new each and every day.