

“Walls and Wounds” John 20:19-31

If we were following in the footsteps of one of my favorite television shows, the long-running children’s program *Sesame Street*, you might say that today’s sermon is brought to you by the letter *W*. John seems to focus our attention on two words that begin with *W*. The week after the very first Easter morning, John tells a tale that is all about walls and wounds.

The writer and humorist Garrison Keillor says that Easter is the time of year when Christians ask themselves two questions: Do we really believe all this stuff? And if we do believe all this stuff, why do we keep living this way?¹

I wonder if those questions might have been swimming around in the minds of those first disciples all those years ago. Did they really believe all that stuff that Mary had told them about seeing the Lord? Did they really believe that Jesus had been raised from the dead? And if they *did* believe that he had been raised from the dead, why were they still living this way?

They had heard the good news that Jesus was alive. And were they rejoicing? Were they celebrating? Were they out spreading the message to anyone and everyone?

No, they were not. The disciples were hiding behind locked doors. They were hiding behind walls. Actual physical walls. But also, walls of fear.

Even after the risen Christ came to them and offered them peace, even after the resurrected Jesus had appeared and breathed the Holy Spirit onto them, even after they had told Thomas that they themselves had seen the Lord, where are they one week later?

They are back behind those locked doors. They have put up their walls again. They are still afraid.

The fact of the matter is that it is not easy to break through those walls of fear. There is plenty to be afraid of. I would not believe anyone who claims to never be afraid.

Being afraid is part of being human. Even Jesus himself may have shared in our human fear on the cross as he cried out to God wondering if God had forsaken him. He may have shared in our human fear in the Garden of Gethsemane when he was deeply distressed and troubled by what was gong to happen to him.

¹ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2016-02/april-3-second-sunday-easter>

To fear is human. None of us can overcome fear completely on our own. But the good news is that Jesus can and does.

The disciples are locked away in their fears. They are hidden away behind locked doors. But nothing locks out Jesus.

Jesus breaks through the walls and stands among them. Jesus breaks through the walls and stands with them in all their fear. Jesus breaks through the walls and gives them his peace.

There are no walls that can keep Jesus from coming and standing with us. Not hospital walls. Not prison walls. Not the walls of a nursing home. Not the walls of the coffin in which we are buried.

Not walls of isolation. Not walls of loneliness. Not walls of depression. Not walls of pain. Not walls of suffering. Not walls of grief. Jesus breaks through all of those walls and comes to stand with us.

And the good news gets even better. Jesus enters any and every locked door. And Jesus not only comes through whatever walls us in. He also brings us out of those locked up places.

The risen Christ sends us out beyond those walls. And he sends us with the Holy Spirit. Jesus not only comes and stands with us. Jesus breathes into us his own Spirit. And the Spirit gives us strength to pass through those walls.

The Spirit opens all those locked doors and pushes us back into the world. The Spirit brings us back from the dead and brings us back to life. Jesus breaks through the walls and gives us his peace. And this peace empowers us to leave the walls we have been locked behind.

The other *W* that John focuses on is the wounds of Jesus. The risen Christ has a resurrected body, but this body still bears the marks of his crucifixion. He continues to bear the scars of his earthly life.

After appearing in that locked room, as he stands there with his disciples, Jesus does not dazzle them with glory. He does not shine or glow as he did when he was transfigured on the mountain with James, Peter, and John.

There were angels in white at the tomb who spoke to Mary. But apparently, what was important to John, and probably what was important to Jesus, was not what he was wearing. It was that he showed them his hands and his side.

Jesus intentionally showed them where the nails had been hammered into his hands. Jesus intentionally showed them where the spear had pierced his side.

And then, one week later, he appears again and invites Thomas to touch his wounds, to put his fingers in the nailprints and to put his hand into the gash in his side.

The disciples were overjoyed to see Jesus' wounds. These are the marks that confirmed that this was the same Jesus who had died on the cross. This is the same Jesus who was their friend and their teacher. This was the same Jesus who had washed their feet at the Last Supper. This was the same Jesus with whom they had eaten so many meals and walked so many miles.

His wounds identified him as Jesus. The deaf community probably knows this better than the rest of us. In American Sign Language, the sign for Jesus is done with both palms open. And then, with the middle finger of one hand, you point to the middle of the open palm and then, with the other hand, you point to the middle of the other palm. Like so.²

Deaf folks never forget that Jesus is the one with wounds on his hands. And it seems as if Jesus doesn't want any of his disciples to forget his wounds. The risen Christ wants all of us to take notice of his scars.

The thing about scars, scars big enough to notice, is that they always come with a story. It's almost impossible to look at a scar and not remember how it came to be. Scars will not let us forget how we got that wound and why we were wounded in the first place.

Once upon a time, on a muggy summer day in south Florida, a little boy decided to go for a swim in an old swimming hole behind his house. He ran out the back door and jumped into the cool water. He dove in without realizing that there was an alligator swimming toward the shore.

The boy's mother was looking out the window of their house and she saw the alligator swimming closer and closer to her son. Terrified, she ran toward the water and began to yell at her son as loudly as she could. The boy heard his mother's warnings and made a U-turn in the water to swim to her on the side of the lake.

² <http://www.lifeprint.com/asl101/pages-signs/j/jesus.htm>

But it was too late. Just as he reached her, the alligator reached him. The boy frantically reached for his mother, his fingernails digging deep into her arms, just as the alligator chomped at his legs.

The alligator was much stronger than his mother, but she was determined not to give up her son. After a few moments of a tug-of-war, a farmer happened to drive by. He heard the woman's screams, raced from his truck, took aim, and shot the alligator.

Remarkably, the boy survived. His legs were extremely scarred by the attack and his mother had deep scratches on her arms where her son's nails had gouged her skin.

Newspaper reporters who interviewed the boy asked if he would show them his wounds. He lifted his pant leg and then, with obvious pride and love, he told them, *"But you should look at my mother's arms. She has the best scars. She has better scars on her arms. She has them because she wouldn't let go of me."*³

The scars that she bore on her arms told the story of how much her child was loved. He had only to look upon those scars to know that he was precious to her. He had only to look upon his mother's scarred arms to know that she would not let go of him even if holding onto him cost her a great deal of pain and suffering.

Even though it left her with scars, her son could feel joy. Those scars showed that his mother was willing to suffer and struggle in order to save him.

I haven't been able to verify that story. I don't know if it actually happened. But here's what I do know and believe to be true.

The disciples of Jesus Christ, all God's children, can rejoice in his scars for much the same reason. The scars that the risen Christ bears on his hands and his side tell us how much we are loved. His wounds are the evidence of how precious we are to him. He has those wounds because he would not let us go.

Jesus presents his wounds to us without any shame. The risen Christ never apologizes for his scars. He doesn't seem to mind if we see them. He doesn't mind if we touch them.

Jesus is open about his wounds, much more open than we tend to be. Christi Brown is a Presbyterian minister in South Carolina. And she recalls the time a few years ago when her step-grandmother was 90 years old and suffering from Alzheimer's Disease.

³ <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon-illustrations/74565/mother-rescues-son-from-alligator-and-leaves-by-sermoncentral>

She was living in a retirement center in Raleigh when she fell and hit her head on the bathroom floor. The aides hurried to help her. And the first thing she said as she reached up to touch the bloody wound on her head was “*Oh dear! I simply cannot go to church looking like this!*”⁴

I suspect that she is hardly alone in that thought. We usually don’t want anyone to see our scars. We would rather keep our wounds hidden. We don’t want to open up about how and where we have been hurt. We would rather keep all of that to ourselves hidden away behind locked doors. We would rather build up walls that prevent anyone from getting a good look at our wounds.

But Jesus sends us out beyond those walls. Jesus calls us to come out from behind those locked doors and show our scars to one another. Jesus calls us to let one another see where we have been wounded.

And, very often, when we follow Jesus’ call, what we find is that healing takes place when we share our wounds with one another.

The Catholic priest and writer Henri Nouwen writes about the death of his mother. He spent the last two weeks of her life with her in the Netherlands. She had been stricken with cancer and those two weeks had been painful for both him and her. He was emotionally and physically drained.

When a friend visited him at his home, he found him hunched over a sheet of white paper with a pen in his hand. He was beginning the story of his mother’s final struggle--a story that would later be published under the title *In Memoriam*.

Knowing that his mother’s passing had been quite hard on him, the visitor asked him why he was writing this story down so soon after her death. And Nouwen replied very simply, “*Because I always try to turn my personal struggles into something helpful for others.*”⁵

By the grace of God, our struggles *can* be helpful for others. The cracks and holes of our lives can be spaces where God’s light can shine through. Just as God worked through the scars and suffering of Jesus to give life and hope to this world, so God can still work today through our wounds, through our brokenness, to give others life and hope.

⁴ <https://www.faithandleadership.com/sermons/scars-hope>

⁵ John S. Mogabgab, "Weavings," September-October 1998, p. 2.

Our hurts can and do contribute healing to others.

A cancer survivor visits a friend who has just been diagnosed with the disease to provide a sympathetic ear and a reassuring voice.

Persons affiliated with Alcoholics Anonymous have long demonstrated how their weakness has become their strength in helping other persons cope with the disease.

I know of a church that has a small group for former prisoners and the group is led by an ex-convict who serves at that church.

I know of a church that has a group for persons struggling with drug abuse and the group is headed by a church member who was addicted to cocaine.

A college student who drove drunk and killed another student now spends time talking with youth groups and students about the impact the accident has had upon his life and the dangers of drunk driving.

A group of Americans who lost relatives in the September 11 attacks visited with an Afghan family who had lost five family members when an errant U. S. missile accidentally destroyed their home. They hoped to bring comfort to the family who had suffered as they had suffered.

A survivor of the horrific murders at Columbine High School twenty years ago has started a support group that has helped survivors of other mass shootings in Las Vegas, in Parkland, Florida, and at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando.

All of these people ministering out of their weaknesses. All of them letting the light of God shine through the cracks and broken places. All of them wounded. And all of them are opening their wounds to the world rather than hiding them.

And as they do, the walls come down. The locked doors open. Jesus is there among them. The risen Christ stands with them. Fear fades away as they are filled with the peace of God.

May it be so for all God's children.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

