

Life-Marks

Preached FCCW, April 8, 2018

John 20:19-31

When I was in junior high I had a friend who had a prominent birthmark. It was one of those strawberry colored stains and it covered the entire lower half of one side of his face. While I don't recall anybody making a big deal about it then, it's hard to imagine him making it through childhood without having to endure a lot of teasing and humiliation.

There are many old wives' tales to explain where birthmarks like the one my friend had come from; including superstitions that they are the result of some fearful or traumatic experience suffered by the mother during pregnancy.

While only a tiny fraction of babies enter life bearing external birthmarks on their bodies, not a one of us goes through life without acquiring invisible blemishes on our soul. Since we are not born with these blemishes, they aren't birthmarks. Perhaps a good name for them would be Life-marks, because we acquire them over the course of our life experiences.

Here, the superstitious explanations for the origins of birthmarks take on a ring of truth. Because, Life-marks are in fact the product of fearful and traumatic experiences. Rejection, betrayal, abandonment, abuse, guilt, shame, grief and host of other wounds leave invisible, but indelible marks on our inward being.

Which is why the word we typically use to describe them is "scars." Emotional and spiritual scars may not be apparent in the same way a physical scar or a birthmark, is. But they reveal themselves in other ways. In a sense of unworthiness, a distrust of other people, and a secret burden of shame. For some of us, our lives come to revolve around a desperate desire to conceal our scars from the world.

So, it's interesting that the risen Jesus not only doesn't try to hide the scars from his crucifixion; he seems eager to let them be seen. On the evening of the day when it was discovered that the tomb where he was buried was empty, the resurrected Jesus appears to a group of his disciples who are hiding out from the authorities.

And what's the first thing he does? He shows them the scars from the nails that were driven into his hands on the cross and the scar from the spear that pierced his side. Not only that, but because Thomas was not there, Jesus comes back a week later and does the same thing for him.

The main talking point when it comes to preaching this passage is usually the Doubting Thomas Angle. It's about Thomas' demanding evidence he can see and touch before he can believe that Jesus has been resurrected. But what seems to be the actual focus of the story is not any absence of belief by Thomas, but the presence of Jesus' scars.

One thing that all the appearances of the resurrected Jesus have in common is that, at first sight, nobody recognizes that it's him. Whatever his resurrected self looks like, it seems to bear little resemblance to his earthly appearance. Except for the crucifixion scars, that is.

Do you ever wonder why that should be? If Jesus had a brand new glorious body, why were the scars still there? It makes about as much sense as trading in your old car for a brand new model but then putting the same scratches and dents on the new vehicle as the old one had, before driving it off the lot.

One thing is certain, it's the disclosure of his scars that marks the moment when the disciples recognize that it really is him. The trauma of witnessing Jesus' crucifixion was a fresh wound on the disciples' hearts, one that drove them into hiding behind locked doors out of a fear of being discovered by their enemies. But, what they were really locked inside of was the shame of their desertion of him and what they most feared was the impossibility of carrying on with the mission he gave them without him at their side.

It says that he came into the room and stood among them and even spoke to them, and yet it wasn't until he showed them his hands and his side, that the disciples' fear and shame was transformed into rejoicing. It's as though there was a power in Jesus' scars that replaced their fear with a sense of peace, and their paralysis with a fresh resolve.

"Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." With those words, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Before you knew it, they were out of that locked room and turning the world upside down.

What are the wounds and scars with which life has marked you? What has kept you locked in fear or isolation? What is it that denies you the peace that Christ wants you to have? What holds you back from following where the Holy Spirit is trying to lead you?

You and I will never see Jesus' scars the way Thomas and the disciples in that locked room saw them. But when we gather at the Communion table we see the bread and fruit of the vine, we hear the words spoken to us, "This is my body, given for YOU, this is my blood shed for YOU."

We hear those words speaking as loudly as the wounds themselves. And we are reminded again that the scars Jesus bore on the cross as he died, are kept for eternity, so that by the sacrifice he made, you and I never need to be defined by the wounds that we have received in our lives.

The message is repeated to us that believing in him we may have new life in his name. Because we can have as hard a time as Thomas did, when it comes to believing that the truth of new life unburdened by old scars, applies to us as much as to anybody else. Especially when our scars have been telling us a different story for as long as we can remember.

Blessed are we when we believe that we were never meant to keep on carrying the scars that Jesus paid the price to remove from us. Blessed are we when we believe that Jesus still bears the wounds of his *dying*, because they represent marks of *new life* for us.

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