

April 19, 2020 Jesus Invites Us to Touch His Wounds John 20:19-36

If your family gathers from time to time around the board game table they may pull out the old traditional one called 'Clue.' In the shortest series of moves the object is to identify where the mysterious crime took place, what weapon was used and by whom did the crime get committed.

The weekly serial story we've come to know as, "Murdoch Mysteries" not only tests these skills but also shows the historical setting of Toronto in the 1890s. We see embodied detective, William Murdoch as he searches for order, pushes toward scientific discovery, and works out his forensic inquiry to solve the mystery using the tools of the dawning 19th century.

Some have called the gospel of John the story of Jesus written for the courtroom. It provides the background to solve the mystery of the resurrected Jesus Christ. It not only tells what he did in life; it also gives the motives behind the facts. John writes in clear terms but through simple metaphors to help us understand who Jesus is and how he relates to us (Jesus is the Bread of Life, the Vine, the Good Shepherd, Living Water, etc.).

John, provides a message that helps us see the truth. He gives us evidence so that people will know with certainty: "these (words) are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). He provides us with the skeptical view through the character, Thomas.

Imagination was not Thomas's long suit. He called a spade a spade. He was a realist. He didn't believe in fairy tales, and if anything else came up that he didn't believe in or couldn't understand, his questions could be pretty direct.

There was that time he and the others had supper with Jesus, for instance. Jesus was talking about dying, and he said he would be leaving them soon, but it wouldn't be forever. He said he'd get things ready for them as soon as he got where he was going, and when their time finally came too, they'd all be together again. They knew the way he was going, he said, and some day they'd be there with him themselves.

Nobody else breathed a word, but Thomas couldn't hold back. When you got right down to it, he said, he personally had no idea where Jesus was going, and he didn't know the way to get there either. "I am the way," was what Jesus said to him (John 14:6), and although Thomas let it go at that, you can't help feeling that he found the answer less than satisfactory. Jesus wasn't a 'way', he was a man, and it was too bad he so often insisted on talking in riddles.

Then in the next few days all the things that everybody could see were going to happen, happened, and Jesus was dead just as he'd said he'd be. That much Thomas was sure of. He'd been on hand himself. There was no doubt about it. And then the thing that nobody had ever been quite able to believe would happen, happened too. He came back to life!

Thomas wasn't around at the time, but all the rest of them were. They were sitting crowded together in a room with the door locked and the shades drawn, scared sick they'd be the ones to get it next, when suddenly Jesus came in. He wasn't a ghost you could see the wallpaper through, and he wasn't just a figment of their imagination because they were all too busy imagining the horrors that were all too likely in store for themselves to imagine anything much about anybody else. He said shalom, "Peace be

with you!" and then showed them enough of where the Romans had let him have it to convince them he was as real as they were if not more so. **He breathed the Holy Spirit on them** and gave them a few instructions to go with it, and then left.

Nobody says where Thomas was at the time. Maybe he'd gone out for a cup of coffee or just to sit in the park for a while and watch the pigeons. Anyway, when he finally returned and they told him what had happened, his reaction was just about what they might have expected. He said that unless Jesus came back again so he could not only see the nail marks for himself but actually touch them, he was afraid that, much as he hated to say so, he simply couldn't believe that what they had seen was anything more than the product of wishful thinking or an optical illusion of an unusually vivid kind.

Eight days later, when Jesus did come back, Thomas was there and got his wish. Jesus let him see him and hear him and touch him, and not even Thomas could hold out against evidence like that. He had no questions left to ask and not enough energy left to ask them with, even if he'd had a couple. All he could say was, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28), and Jesus seemed to consider that under the circumstances, that was enough.

Then Jesus asked a question of his own. "Have you believed because you have seen me?" he said and then added, addressing himself to all the generations that have come since, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe" (John 20:29).

John's intention is to lead us believers to solve the mystery. He is still doing this in our time as the story of Thomas rings helpful and hopeful in our day. Thomas cries out, "My Lord and my God!" It is not the witness of Thomas alone that is convincing. The word of Thomas, spoken through the voice of John, comes to us interpreted by Thomas' legal counsel. Jesus promised in John (15:26) to send an advocate, a counselor, to aid us in our understanding of mysterious things of faith.

There's a great deal that I appreciate about Thomas's encounter with Jesus, but what I find most helpful in this Covid-19 time, is that Jesus appears to his skeptical disciple in a body that is scarred and wounded. A body that openly bears its traumatic history. A body that refuses to hide its suffering, its sorrow, its brokenness. Writer, Debie Thomas says this, "What Jesus sports are not old wounds. They are wounds so raw that the doubting disciple places his fingers inside of them. Perhaps Jesus winces when Thomas touches him, but to me, the wincing signals real life, lived at a level we can comprehend. It signals real engagement. Real presence. Real pain. It speaks the very words I hunger to hear: "I am *with you*. I am with you where it hurts. I don't float thousands of sanitized feet above reality. Even after death, I dwell in the hot, searing heart of things. Exactly where you dwell."

Sometimes Christians put a lot of stock in completed victories. We value the race won, the mountain scaled, the enemy defeated, the obstacle overcome. We welcome stories of failure to an extent, but only when those stories are shared in retrospect, long after the sordid worst is over. Sin that has surrendered to holiness? That's a Christian story. But sin that clings? Challenges that won't ease up? A wound — physical, psychological, or relational — that remains? We squirm. We turn our eyes away. We worry.

But Jesus's wounded body reminds me that some hurts are for keeps. Some markers of pain, loss, trauma, and horror leave traces that no amount of faith and prayers will take away. Some wounds remain, even after resurrection — and that's okay. It's *okay*

to celebrate Jesus's rising — and grieve our catastrophic losses at the same time. It's okay to hear other people's uplifting faith stories and say, "I'm happy for you, but my heart is still broken." It's okay to ache for more of Jesus, and to hold our ache in tension with the joys of Easter.

This year — more than ever — I cherish the wounds in Jesus's post-resurrection life. On this first Sunday after Easter, even though we are a resurrection people, we are still hurting. The world is still wounded. Regardless of where on the planet we live, we are still anticipating grief on a scale most of us have never experienced before. This year especially, Jesus's scarred body speaks with great power, tenderness, mercy, and truth. Allow them to speak to you.

All over the place people are reacting in various ways to minister to those wounds of Christ in the world. Dr. Nadia Alam, is a family physician and anesthetist in Georgetown. She is past-president of the Ontario Medical Association. This was her experience, about a week ago.

Her cellphone rang. It was the hospitalist, consulting her for an intubation on the floor. An elderly man with COVID-19 pneumonia. Poor lung function. He was needing more and more oxygen. He was at risk of respiratory failure. She recalls her heart pounding. The team — a nurse, a respiratory therapist and Dr. Alam — gear up and review the plan. The patient is isolated in a negative pressure room. Once they go in, they will stay in until they're done. Each time they enter and exit, they risk spreading the virus. So they gather all the supplies they might need, preparing for all possibilities. Because sometimes you can't intubate a patient. Sometimes you need to put a tube right into their trachea. Sometimes their blood pressure tanks. Sometimes they go into cardiac arrest and die. They go in. Late afternoon sunlight slants through the window. Cotton-ball clouds against a blue, blue sky. Mr. X's face is turned towards the light. His hoarse breathing, is the only sound in the room. He sits, shoulders slumped, huffing and puffing away. His white hair tangled. He looks small. Alone. He turns towards the doctor, his eyes hopeful.

Given his age, his other complex illnesses, his frailty, his physical exam, Mr. X doesn't look like an easy intubation. Worse, he faces a high risk of death on the ventilator. There is no cure for COVID-19. Even a ventilator is no cure for COVID-19. At best, it buys a person time, but there is no guarantee they will live. Ten years doing this job: Dr. Alam has put people on life support as an anesthetist, she has helped people die a good death as a family doctor who does palliative care. She wants to make sure Mr. X knows exactly what he is choosing. He listens carefully. He is sharp as a tack. "Maybe I live, maybe I die." I nod. "With or without the ventilator."

He closes his eyes. Looks back out the window. The silence stretches. "No tube." "You sure? It's a difficult decision. The doctor says, I will be here no matter what you choose." "If I die, I don't want to die on a machine, he says" "I want to die looking at the sky. Talking to my family."

Seeing the tears in his eyes, the eyes of the doctor well up too. She sits down. Dr. Alam reaches over and holds his hand. She is wearing two sets of gloves, so she can't feel the warmth of his skin. In fact, her hands feel nothing. But she remembers being so sad. She remembers saying in her mind, "I hope he feels something more than plastic in his hands".

He says, "I was careful. We did what we were told. All I did was go to the store one time. One time." They call his family on his cellphone. His wife weeps. She's sick too and so afraid. "Please, can we see him?" She begs. His son begs. And the doctor's heart breaks. "I'll talk to his doctor," she promised. A tear rolls down her cheek. She can't wipe it away. She recalls, I can't contaminate myself, my mask. So I let it fall. I stay with him. Sit with him. Hold his hand. And we keep watching that sky. Dr. Nadia Alam sat with Mr. X in his wounded state and was present to him, and helped him through any fear, in some ways like Our Lord was with Thomas in his anxious doubting.

Jesus came and breathed on those gathered, saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit." They had been promised an advocate on Jesus' departure. They have the Spirit and now have the power of the risen Lord on their side. Thomas says, "you are my Lord and my God."

Thomas is filled with the Spirit, with confidence and hope. He was able to leave the locked doors of fear. Later, Thomas took up the cause of travelling to a country foreign to him, to preach the good news to a people who spoke another language and lived in a different manner to the way he lived. Thomas ventured forth in faith to establish the church in India, the Mar Thoma church. Others who had similar experiences with Thomas, stayed close to home, joined the family fishing business again, cared for their parents in old age and their family members. The challenge for us is, "Can we say 'My Lord and my God' when we see Christ's wounds wherever they appear in our world?"

At Easter the immense gift of the resurrection Spirit was unleashed on Jesus' followers. That very gift is manifest and magnified in our day in ways that are pertinent to the wounds of Christ in our time. Thanks be to God!

Acknowledging Inspiration from:

Thomas, Debie, [Journey with Jesus webzine](#), "Unless I See", April 12, 2020

Rosie Dimanno column, Toronto Star, April 13, 2020