

Growing Into Our Scars

John 20:19-31

There's something about a scar that begs for a story.

When I see someone with an intriguing scar, I always want to know how they got it. It would be rude to ask, and so I don't, but I keep hoping it will come up in conversation. I wonder what lesson is behind the stitches on the knee ...what adventure brought the scar on the forehead...what happened right before the mark on the arm? Sometimes it's a story of challenge and triumph. Other times it's a painful reminder of a past hurt. But there's always a story.

It intrigues me that, after his resurrection, Jesus could have come back without his scars, but he kept them. He could have appeared to his friends in his pre-death state, whole and shining with glory, but he chose to stay scarred. He picked this way of coming to the people he loves.

The people who wrote down the gospel stories could have skipped the ugly parts, too. They could have left out these stories of fear and doubt, but they give us the whole picture, good and doubtful.

After the fear of the past week, after watching their beloved teacher die, the disciples had their own scars. The story says that the disciples were hiding in fear of the people who put Jesus to death, which is understandable. Would the authorities come looking for them next?

They may also have been hiding in fear of Jesus.

They had good reason to hide. They fell asleep when he needed them, they denied him, deserted him at the cross, and then gave in to fear.

But still Jesus came and what he said was: "Peace be with you." Don't fret, he was saying. Don't get stuck in the past.

The one with the scars is also the one with the ability to heal.

Thomas spoke to us about doubt, which we all have, but also about the power of not giving up. He missed the big reveal when Jesus came the first time. Instead of saying "oh well," and moving on, Thomas asked for what the other disciples got. He wanted to see for himself.

For the disciples, Jesus' death was a kind of death for them, too. They had to finally accept that Jesus wasn't exactly the Messiah they expected. This is a theme all through the gospels, but his death made it real. This was no conquering hero Messiah ...not a war leader ...this was the kind of teacher who reveals grace with his scars, not his perfection. This is the kind of teacher who is about service, not triumph.

We have this moment all the time, when we buckle down to the real job we have, instead of waiting for the perfect one ...or make our peace with the real person we married, instead of the Hallmark card version of love... when we go to the college we can afford, instead of the one that looked so perfect on the tour ...when we decide to show up for our real lives, instead of waiting until we have money, get braces, lose fifteen pounds, move into our dream house, and so on.

Thomas was ready — he was ready to see the scarred Jesus, instead of the perfect one. And he invites us to jump into our own imperfect, broken, battered lives in the same way.

Rachel Macy Stafford told a story about a teaching job and one of her own greatest teachers. He was, as she said "a 10-year-old boy born to a drug-addicted mother, with an Individualized Education Plan thicker than an encyclopedia — a boy with permanent scars along the side of his left arm from a beating with an extension cord when he was three." She had a teaching job far from home, in a classroom full of children with deep needs. They were delayed in their learning, and difficult in their behavior. The first few months of school were hard, with tears on the way to work and tears on the way home. She prayed every day that this would be the day to make a difference for a kid.

“On this particular morning,” she said, “I was excited. The other lead teacher and I had spent weeks teaching the children appropriate behavior for public outings. We would be going putt-putting and out to lunch. Miraculously, most of the children in class had earned this privilege — only a few had not.”

Kyle was one of the students who had not earned the field trip, and he was angry. To show it, “he began screaming, cursing, spitting, and swinging at anything within striking distance. And then he did what he’d done at all his other schools, at home, even once at a juvenile detention center ...he ran” right out into the traffic in front of the school. And she ran after him. Kyle was fast. His older brothers were track stars at high school. Fortunately, she had on tennis shoes for the field trip.

“Kyle took a sharp left and began walking through a dilapidated strip mall. Getting tired, he bent over with his hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath. That is when he saw me. I must have looked ridiculous — the front of my lightweight blouse soaked with sweat; my once-styled hair now plastered to the side of my beet red face. He stood up abruptly ...but it was not a look of fear. I saw his body relax. He did not attempt to run again ...My exhaustion caused me to slow to a walk. He opened his mouth to speak when a police car pulled up, abruptly filling the space between Kyle and me. The principal of the school and an officer got out. They spoke calmly to Kyle who got into the car.... Kyle eventually came back to school.... As weeks passed, he was glued to my side, complying with instructions, attempting to do his work, and occasionally even smiling. For a child with severe attachment issues, it was quite amazing that he was developing a bond with me. One day on the way to art class, Kyle unexpectedly grasped my hand. It was unusual for a boy his age and size to hold his teacher’s hand, but I knew I must act like it was the most normal thing in the world.

I simply relished the moment — an unimaginable breakthrough from the child whose file bore the words: “Unable to express love or maintain a loving relationship with another human being.” She adds, “Ten years have passed since I’ve seen Kyle... I see Kyle’s face and remember I don’t always have to have the answer. Because sometimes there is no clear-cut answer. I think of Kyle and remember the power of presence.”

When Kyle ran away, the teacher told the speech therapist, who knew him well, how she felt like she had failed him. She said that she should have known how to do more for him. The therapist put her hand on the teacher’s shoulder and told her what had made the difference. “No one ever ran after him before. No one. They just let him go.”

The people with the scars turn into our teachers. Our own scars also become our wisdom.

Our imperfection is also the gift we have to give.

Our bumps, bruises, and hurts are places where grace shows up. I should add that I mean this in a spiritual sense. If someone in your life is giving you real bumps and bruises, that’s not God’s will for any of us. We think we make it through life in spite of our scars, but maybe it’s because of scars. We think we have faith in spite of our doubts, and it turns out to be because of doubts. Grace shows up in the broken places.

Glory shows up with the scars.

This is our story, the story of our own scars.

In the name of the risen and scarred Christ, Amen.