

I. Advanced Organizer

- A. I was at the Oakland Zoo this Monday, enjoying the view from the top of the hill, watching the first graders I was chaperoning on their field trip, laughing and playing, when I first saw the news headline coming across my phone: **the cathedral at Notre Dame was in flames**. Within hours my social media timelines were filled with tributes to the monumental centuries-old church. Folks from different faith traditions around the world lamented the damage done as the flames devoured the cathedral roof and the iconic spire collapsed. **It was a poignant reminder, in the beginning of Holy Week, how fragile this life can be.**
- B. **Today is Easter Sunday, what many Christians consider the most important day of the year, as we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus.** But this celebration doesn't just come on its own. It comes at the end of a season. In the last six plus weeks, Jesus-followers from traditions around the world have been **observing Lent**, a time to contemplate Jesus' earthly journey of ministry: from his temptation in the wilderness to the highs and lows as he ministered and healed and preached, building up to the emotional last week of his life that the gospels relate. A week that started with a triumphal entry to the Holy City of Jerusalem, as the crowds welcomed him as God's anointed, and ended five days later at Good Friday, as a mob mentality of those same crowds is whipped up against him and **he is unjustly convicted and crucified as an enemy of the state, a threat to the powers of empire that will not endure sedition and rivalry.**
- C. Here in our Haven community, over the last six or so weeks we've been considering the Lenten season **through the particular lens of human vulnerability**. "Perhaps the most true thing we can say about what it means to be human", I have been naming, "is that we are vulnerable." We are subject to wounding, we have the capacity for injury. As much as we try to resist it, the honest reality is that **we are all able to be hurt, we are all able to get sick**. Like we've seen this week in Paris, all it takes is a spark to undo everything we have so carefully built and cultivated. **Each of us is simply one accident, or act of violence or medical diagnosis away from a different reality.**
- D. So this Lent, we've been asking: what does it mean that our faith proclaims that **God chooses to reveal God's self most clearly through the person of Jesus?** Jesus is understood to be God's revelation of who God is, and this Jesus seems not to try to escape this human vulnerability but to embrace it, to embody it. **In Jesus the embodiment of human vulnerability is on display most clearly through the Good Friday account:** Jesus standing with humanity as one unjustly victimized, suffering torture and death at the hands of a scapegoating mob.
- E. **Throughout Lent here at Haven we've considered stories of vulnerability both within our community, and from without** - stories of how living vulnerably impacts our daily life, and the lens through which we navigate the world, including our journey of faith. We've heard stories about living with various disabilities, about experiencing stigmatization from others, about grieving illness and loss and our helplessness in the face of these things. **And we've found solidarity in our stories with this Christ who also suffers**, this Divine one who reveals themselves not through might that is removed from our human pain, not through *invulnerability*, but through the embrace of frailty and weakness. **In considering Jesus through the lens of vulnerability, we've found beauty in a God that suffers with us.**
- F. But that may leave us feeling some disconnect with today's Easter story. **What happens to the suffering of Jesus when he is raised from the dead?** Is his pain just a set-up to his glory? How do we, if we are still in pain, connect with a God who has been delivered from his own? **What happens to vulnerability after the resurrection?**

1. Scholar and theologian **Dr. Christena Cleveland** highlighted this very tension in a piece she wrote this week, where she shared her story of growing up a preacher's daughter in a prosperity gospel minded church, and finding as an eight year old girl that she had chicken pox on Easter. Dutifully, she attended church anyway, quarantined in her Easter Best to the back row during the jubilant celebration. In her words: *"There was marching and dancing and trumpets and shouting and flags. Words like victory, conquer and vanquish were prominently used to describe the finality of Christ's resurrection. Throughout the entire service preachers-turned-drill-commanders exhorted us to energetically praise this God who had once and for all defeated death, sickness, and evil."*

But one question nagged my 8-year-old mind as I sat in my little quarantine at the back of the sanctuary: "How am I sick if Christ has defeated sickness once and for all?"

There was a finality to the Easter celebration that left me wondering how to connect with a victorious God while feeling defeatedly sick. In other words, it seemed impossible to connect the festive finality of the Easter celebration with the anguish of Good Friday and the doubt of Holy Saturday. It was as if anguish (in this case, chicken pox-fueled anguish) and doubt were figments of my anemic theological imagination; they weren't worth recognizing, and they certainly didn't have any place on Easter Sunday where it was all happy-clappy, rah rah. The fact that I was at church, riddled with chicken pox, being told to stand up and shout and dance and proclaim God's victory over sickness was proof that the finality of the resurrection didn't leave room for human need.

- G. Perhaps some of you can relate to what Christena is saying. Perhaps you have a bit of ambivalence about celebrating this holiday at all. **Perhaps you are in a place where your human need is more present than God's victory over vulnerability.** Today I want to look for a bit at a part of the Easter story that I think gives room for these tensions, and perhaps even hope that for those of us who are fully aware today of our wounds and our weaknesses, that this resurrection story might be good news for us too.

II. Looking at John 20.

- A. **We're going to be looking together at a story that is found in the Easter accounts in the gospel of John.** This happens *after* the women encounter the empty tomb. *After* they testify to the men in their community that the body was gone. *After* John and Peter have raced to the tomb to see it with their own eyes and wonder at what they've observed. *After* Mary Magdalene was weeping in the garden and encountered the risen Jesus, who she mistook for the gardener until he tenderly called her name. *After* these things, and after Mary has told her friends about them, this story picks up hours later, the evening of the first Easter Sunday.

1. **19 On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the disciples had gathered together and locked the doors of the place because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." 20 When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 So Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. Just as the Father has sent me, I also send you." 22 And after he said this, he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you retain anyone's sins, they are retained."**

24 Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 The other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he replied, "Unless I see the wounds from the nails in his hands, and put my finger into the wounds from the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will never believe it!"

26 Eight days later the disciples were again together in the house, and Thomas

was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" 27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and examine my hands. Extend your hand and put it into my side. Do not continue in your unbelief, but believe." 28 Thomas replied to him, "My Lord and my God!" 29 Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are the people who have not seen and yet have believed."

- B. So this is an interesting story. In it we see **movement from everyone Jesus encounters**. Movement from fear to joy. Movement from skepticism to trust. But **what is at the heart of that movement?** What catalyzes it?
1. To say it's the appearance of a resurrected Jesus isn't specific enough. **It's not just the fact of Jesus' resurrection that changes things.** Jesus here has two different encounters with folks: first the group gathered on that first Easter night, and then with Thomas, who had missed the first encounter. But in each of those encounters **the turning point** from fear to joy, from unbelief to belief is the same thing. It's not the words of Jesus that brings change. It's not even his miraculous ability to appear in a locked room without going through the door. What changes each encounter is the moment Jesus shows his friends **the marks on his body. When he shows them his scars.**
 2. When Jesus meets the group on Easter evening, he finds them cowering in fear, huddling together in a locked room. **What were they so afraid of?**
 - a) John alludes to **Jewish authorities** when he references their fear. Perhaps they are unsure of what to make of today's headline: that Jesus' body has gone missing. They themselves know they didn't move the body, which may lead them to wonder who did? **Could the same authorities who were threatened by Jesus now be hiding his body so as to frame them, and stir up more violent hostility aimed at Jesus' closest followers?**
 - b) Or should they believe the words of Mary Magdalene, who claims she encountered a Jesus who has somehow astonishingly come back to life? Perhaps, in addition to fearing those forces who brought about the death of Jesus, **they fear what Jesus himself might say to them.** Mary and the other women stayed till the end, weeping at the cross, attending to his broken body. Perhaps that is why he may have tenderly appeared to her. But what about these closest disciples, these men who had scattered when Jesus was arrested, hiding, abandoning him in his moment of need, just hours after he'd predicted his own betrayal? If he really had returned, what words might Jesus have for them and were they ready to hear them?
 - c) Encountering them, **Jesus seems to sense their fear**, which is likely why in this short passage three times he says "Peace be with you." But it isn't these words themselves that seem to bring peace. **It's the scars that speak to Jesus followers in ways that transform things.**
 - d) It's only after he shows them his scars, that **the fearful disciples demeanor changes and they are filled with joy.** Now, in this space of joy they can receive the peace that Jesus wants for them. **Because they've seen his scars.** Why?
 3. **Thomas' interaction with the wounds is even more intimate.** Having missed a very important dinner party, we get the sense that his friends' story is too much for him to accept. Despite the bad rap that Thomas has gotten through the millennia for being a "doubter", who among us can really blame him? What's interesting to me is that **this is the same Thomas showed keen awareness earlier in the gospel that death may have**

been the trajectory for Jesus, and with him, Thomas and his other close friends. When Jesus is persuading them to accompany him back to the area of Jerusalem, where Jesus has recently narrowly escaped stoning, so that they can visit the family of Lazarus, who has just died, Thomas is the one to tell his friends, **“Let us go too, so that we may die with him.”**

a) **Thomas seems to me to be an analytical guy**, not the kind who leads with his emotions but who analyzes evidence and uses logic and pragmatism to reason his way forward. He saw the forces at play. He knew death was a possible, even likely, outcome as Jesus challenged entrenched authorities, and he was willing to face that death himself. The horrifying events of Good Friday were not a shock to Thomas, but likely **a painful validation of his own instinct, as well as an exposing of his own weakness in the face of trial**. Despite Thomas’ intention to be a good ally, his bravado in the face of hypothetical oppression, when the moment came, he did not stand up and die with Jesus. **He did not put his body on the line for the man he loved and followed**. He disappeared, like all the rest. He hid, and he had the privilege to do so, likely shrouded in the guilt that anticipating what was coming hadn’t actually given him the strength to face it with Jesus.

b) So Thomas may have anticipated Good Friday. **What he had no capacity to anticipate was Easter Sunday**. He knew death was final, to expect him to believe otherwise would require real evidence. *“Unless I see the wounds from the nails in his hands, and put my finger into the wounds from the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will never believe it!”*

4. When Jesus encounters Thomas, **he does not call him out for abandoning him, nor does he chastise his lack of faith**. He speaks Peace to Thomas, and then he invites him to an intimate exploration of his hands and his side. “Reach out,” Jesus says. **“Don’t be shy. Put your fingers on my wounds. Don’t just look with your eyes. Touch my scars, take them in, and believe.”** And in that moment, the analytical, skeptical, failed ally **Thomas is drawn from self-protection to worship**. “My Lord and my God” he proclaims. Not because of Jesus’ words. But because of his scars. Why?

C. As a young photographer, **Sophie Mayanne was intrigued by the ways that society conditions us to think that certain aspects of our physicality are beautiful, while others are flawed**. “Beauty is something that has always interested me,” she has said, “and I like to find beauty which can be overlooked.” One area where she noticed beauty overlooked most clearly is in how people regard the physical scars they live with. Inspired by this idea, Sophie began what she intended to be a small photo project, taking portraits of people with their scars and allowing them to tell the story box where it came from. Over the last couple of years, her project *Behind the Scars* has gone viral and become a global phenomenon. People from around the globe have asked Sophie to take their picture, as they share their story.

1. Maya: *“I was diagnosed with Epidermolysis bullosa (EB) when I was 18 months old. EB is a rare genetic condition which causes the skin to blister and tear at the slightest touch. Due to the sensitivity of my skin, over the years I have gained many scars...I have always been self conscious and ashamed of it, until very recently when I decided to embrace it and not let it hold me back from living life to the fullest.”*
2. Jared: *“My scar originates from an open-heart surgery I had at 17 to correct a congenital heart condition that was leading me to heart failure....Being part of the “zipper club” has its benefits (I rather enjoy being alive.) However, my scar healed like the surgeon lost control of the bonesaw, and I am left with a very distinct marking that is an unsubtle reminder of my*

experiences, good and bad. The reactions I typically receive when people see my scar have led it to become my biggest insecurity. It's a constant battle between hate and acceptance. Hate because I'm often looked at as disfigured and broken, as well as some physical discomfort it causes; acceptance because it's a significant part of my life story and gives a glimpse into the mental and physical struggle I have to live a normal life that most people will never have insight to."

3. One more, and a warning, this involves self-harm. Idara: *"I started self-harming when I was around 11 years old. It started off as a response to the overwhelming feelings that I was experiencing... It quickly spiraled into an addiction and I didn't know how to stop. The scars piled up on my arms and legs and other people started to notice. I felt ugly, grotesque and ashamed. Strangers on the street would question me relentlessly about them - and when the weather got hot - I knew I needed to cover them up, through fear of judgement. So for years all I wore were long sleeves and jeans. At times I feel guilty because the scars are self inflicted - but I am happy to say that I am now fully recovered. Even though I will always have these permanent scars on my body, they serve as a reminder to the battles I have fought and won. I am proud to show the world that it is okay to have scars - no matter where they have come from."*

4. **Every scar has a story.** Every scar has a story. And every person who lives long enough to be deeply wounded has a scar. **We all carry injury.** Some of us wear our injuries on our skin, others of us may have scars on our spirits that are hidden from view, but nevertheless we carry the markers of our vulnerability every where we go. And yet, as these three and so many others have testified, there is a power released when we can move from living as scarred people, defined by wounds and afraid of what they reveal, to beautiful, healing people, who happen to wear scars. **There is power when our wounds no longer define us, even as they remain part of our story.**

D. In college, **I was a theater student, and I remember one day in a scene rehearsal where an invisible scar of mine showed itself in an uninvited way.** My scene partner and I were working on building our characters through improvising some of the life experiences in their backstories, to help us get in touch with who these people that we were trying to embody really were. And knowing my character's biography, he decided to force himself on me, claiming he was doing me a favor, helping me to experience a taste of the sexual violence that my character had suffered. What he didn't know until I forcefully pushed him away and ended the rehearsal without explanation, was that **I didn't need to improvise that experience** to understand it. **I had been living with the wounds of sexual violence for years.** Wounds from my childhood compounded by wounds from young adulthood. These wounds left marks that for years left me afraid of intimacy, ashamed of my impurity, and filled with self-loathing.

1. And yet, these wounds were not the end of my story. Coming to faith in Jesus, for me, **was the experience of finding the healing power of unconditional acceptance.** In the person of Jesus, I connected with a Divine Love who fully embraced me without qualification or condemnation, and who defended me when others threatened to throw stones in my direction. I encountered a God that did not stand idly by as I was violated, but wept as I wept and committed to my restoration and healing. **And through a journey of faith, I have experienced healing that has not erased these wounds of my past, but has transformed them into signs of strength and life after loss. Into the scars that inform my story.**
2. Some have asked me why in more recent years, I have chosen to stand publicly with the queer and trans community, even though I myself do not identify as queer or trans. And people ask this, of course, knowing that this choice to start a church that is fully openly

LGBTQ inclusive has cost me greatly in my relationships with the church family I was nurtured in for decades. While there are many ways that question could be answered, **one important one is by acknowledging my own scars and letting them tell their story.** I may not know what it is like to be queer and rejected by your family, I may not know what it's like to be trans and forced out of your church, **but I do know what it's like to be wounded.** And I know what it's like to **live into the healing of Jesus' radically inclusive and affirming self-giving love.** Whatever the cost, my scars compel me to testify to that healing inclusion and to co-create spaces where others wounds can also be healed. Where others places of vulnerability can be redeemed.

E. The reason I think **Jesus' scars are so powerful** that they bring the fearful ones to joy and the skeptics to worship, is **because they reveal** what I think we all long to know: that **our vulnerability can be redeemed.** Our wounding matters, it's story matters, but it doesn't bear the final word. We all long to know that loss and frailty and illness are not the end. **They do not define us.** But neither are they erased. The wounds we suffer do carry forward in some way into the life that is to come. **Resurrection does not erase our suffering. It transforms it.** It redeems it. It incorporates our vulnerable life into an invulnerable future. Jesus rises bearing scars. We worship a God who is scarred, forever marked by the wounds of the vulnerability of life and love. This Divine heart is accessible to us in our own frailty, chicken pox and all, but it also points us to something beyond it.

1. Throughout the last week **we've heard stories about the cathedral at Notre Dame**, how it has been severely injured before, and rebuilt. Money has poured in from people around the world to restore the cathedral again; a billion dollars. The attention to Notre Dame and its restoration also provided an opportunity to talk about the three historically black churches in Louisiana that were recently destroyed by a racist arsonist. After journalist Yashar Ali tweeted a challenge for folks to donate to their restoration, around two million dollars has come their way through GoFundMe. One of the pastors said these gifts will help resurrect these churches. All of these churches will be rebuilt and these fires will become part of their history. **Resurrection brings vulnerability redeemed.**

III. There's one more beautiful thing that happens in this story I want to draw your attention to as we end.

A. In his first encounter with the followers gathered on Easter evening, after the disciples fear has turned to joy, Jesus gives them an invitation. ***"Peace be with you. Just as the Father has sent me, I also send you."* 22 And after he said this, he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."**

1. In John's telling, **the gift of the Holy Spirit comes directly through the breath of Jesus**, echoing the image of the creator in Genesis breathing the breath of life into the first humans. And that new creative act, that outpouring of Divine breath into human vulnerability gives these first Jesus- followers the capacity to do what they have now witnessed, to allow their wounds to be transformed into scars that speak.
2. **Each of these close followers of Jesus has just experienced great trauma.** They've seen their best friend and mentor publicly shamed, tortured and executed. They've seen the dreams they thought they were living into obliterated. They like Thomas, feel the guilt of complicity participating in the system that traumatized them by running away and saving themselves rather than confronting the powers that targeted their Rabbi.
3. And yet in this moment, **the resurrected God, bearing the scars of his wounding, as well as the truth that death has not had the final word, this God is calling them into resurrection too.** With the breath of the Spirit they are invited to receive healing for their

wounds. To allow them to become scars with stories. And to be sent to share those stories, those signs of life and hope, that vulnerability can and will be redeemed.

4. As we end, I want to issue that same invitation to all of us. **It might feel hard to imagine on our own moving beyond wounding, but Jesus didn't expect his followers to make this move on their own, and we don't need to either.** So I ask you to consider: where are the places where you feel wounded today? What are your markers of vulnerability? Where are you longing to experience divine redemption? What might resurrection look like in your places of loss? I'm going to give us a moment to reflect on those questions, and then I want to invite us to receive God's Spirit. (Would you stand with me and pray).

Questions for Reflection and Conversation

1. How do you generally respond when encountering others with scars, either physical, emotional, or psychological? Has that changed over time?
2. What is your relationship with your own wounds and scars, either physical, emotional, or psychological? Has that changed over time?
3. Have you seen ways in which your scars have informed your story in ways that make an impact for yourself or others? How might the Spirit be involved in that process?