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“The Point of the Story”
John 20:19-29

Question: Why are certain stories in the bible? In the 66 books of the bible, just about every type of literature is present: historical narratives, genealogies, myths, poetry, rhetoric, parables, legal codes, personal letters, and much more. There is bible material that is meant to teach us, inspire us, comfort us and challenge us. But I am convinced that some scripture is there to make sure we talk about important topics; so we not only read about things that happened long ago, but we also pause long enough to learn about God as we consider the deeper faith issues involved.

Let me give an example from one of the hardest stories in the bible: the story of the rape of Tamar found in 2 Samuel 13. King David had lots of children by lots of wives. David's eldest son was Amnon, who lusted after his half-sister named Tamar. The story is not pretty, for it involved Amnon pretending to be sick and asking for Tamar to come alone to prepare him a meal. When she did so, Amnon grabbed her, and despite her many protests, he forcibly raped her. To make matters worse, immediately afterwards Amnon detested her and had her thrown out of his quarters. Wounded, violated against her will, Tamar could no longer be considered a worthy bride or daughter in the royal house; she would ever be an outcast because of Amnon's violent lust. So she tore her white robe, put ashes on her head, and wept loudly as she made her way home. To make matters worse, King David heard about this, but refused to do anything for Tamar because Amnon was the eldest and favorite son. And Tamar's brother, Absalom, counseled her not to make a fuss over this, while he plotted how he could use the crime against Tamar both to get revenge on Amnon and make himself the next heir to the royal throne. The last mention of Tamar in the bible simply says this: *So Tamar remained, a desolate woman, in her brother Absalom's house.*

Why is this story in the bible? For lots of reasons. It gives an honest account of the tangled, violent, and often sinful history of the house of King David. This bible story forces us to ask: Where is God in moments of rape and violence? Must male lust always lead to the violation of others with no immediate consequence? And for these victims who remain, how can we offer them healing or hope when so much has been stolen from them by sexual violence? Because this story is in the bible, it forces us to talk about these important things, not just from a historical perspective about life 3,000 years ago but how Tamar's story is still being played out today in far too many families.

There are other stories in the bible, which move us to similar, deeper discussions. The story of the love shared by David and Jonathan leads us to discuss the nature of true affection that can exist in same gender relationships (2 Samuel 1). The story of



Saul's visit to the Witch of Endor raises the question of the occult and to what extent do we still seek out false spiritual answers in our attempts to have full control over our own fates (1 Samuel 28). And then there's the gospel story we read this morning, the story of Doubting Thomas, that compels us to talk about something much deeper than might initially be apparent.

When the resurrection of Jesus is described in the first gospels, there are common features in their individual stories: the women going to the tomb early in the morning, seeing the stone rolled away and the graveclothes abandoned on the floor, seeing a heavenly messenger who tells them "The Lord has risen," and then an encounter with the risen Christ himself. Invariably it took some effort for Jesus to convince the disciples, male and female, that he was alive. In Luke's gospel, for example, Jesus said, *Why are you frightened and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.* (Luke 24:38-39). John elaborates on two dynamics from those earlier resurrection stories: the detail of doubt and the detail of touching Jesus' wounded hands and feet, and gives us the story of Thomas, the disciple who missed Jesus' "Act I" but caught Jesus' "Act II" a week later. So back to our original question: Why is this story in the bible? I think it's there to help us with our doubts and our wounds in today's world.

Let's face it: The vast majority of people have come to faith in Jesus Christ without having seen him after his resurrection. A blessed few saw the risen Lord, but many others down through the ages did not. John tells the story of doubting Thomas to name that reality and to get us to think about what it means to believe without seeing. John is honest in acknowledging that while such doubts are natural, putting extra demands on Christ is not the way to resolve the situation. Thomas demanded that he be able to feel with his finger the actual nail wounds in Jesus' hands and side before he would believe. Thomas wants the Easter story on his own terms; in any relationship with God, that is never a helpful dynamic. So at this point, it appears that we have two choices: either reject Christ for lack of physical evidence, or fully believe in Christ despite not seeing any visible proof of his resurrection. But I would argue that there's a third option before us, and that is part of the reason why this story is in our bible.

It is important to acknowledge our human need to interact using our sense of touch. We are tactile creatures. Babies will not thrive if they are not held and cuddled. People of all ages need positive touch and embraces. This is even more of a contemporary issue, given our current habit of having relationships through cyberspace alone: Facebook friends, Twitter followers, personal connections made through the Internet between people who never meet face to face. Ultimately, these superficial connections can keep us from developing the skills necessary for deeper relationships. We should never underestimate the importance of making solid connections.¹



Thomas' prideful mistake was saying *I will not believe unless I make a solid connection with Jesus, unless I touch the marks in his hand and side*. But his instinct was that he would know Jesus through Jesus' wounds and scars. That instinct was actually a good one, and one that is important for us to remember today. In the resurrection stories, the risen Lord was almost never recognized simply by his appearance; his face, for example. In Luke's gospel, Jesus was recognized while breaking bread, in the act of being host at a meal. And here in John's gospel, the thing that would prove to Thomas that Jesus was alive was not seeing Jesus' face or clothes, but rather seeing the wounds and marks left by his crucifixion.

Perhaps you, too, feel a desire to see Jesus, to know that he is the resurrected Lord. Even if you read the beatitude tucked in John's gospel lesson for today that says *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe* (John 20:29), still a part of you wants to see Jesus. I think the answer to that desire is not to look for Jesus' face, but to look for his scars and wounds around you. Then go ahead and reach out and touch those wounds, wherever you find them; put your fingers on scars, wash or dress or caress these tender places wherever you may find them – for in seeing and touching scars, you will come to know that Jesus Christ is alive.

This is not just Sunday morning rhetoric. I'm being quite serious here. Jesus is more likely to be found when you look for scars than if you look for his actual face. Remember the famous scene near the end of Homer's *Odyssey*? It was when poor Odysseus finally returned home after years of wandering and war. He disguised himself as an old man and no one recognized him, not even his wife and son. But as he went to bed that night, his old nurse helped him prepare for bath time; and when she glimpsed a scar on Odysseus' leg, she knew it was one her former master had received as a child. She recognized him because of his scar.

Second, remember how Jesus said, *As the Father has sent me, so I send you*. What does that mean? Is that command something superficial, such as wearing the same clothes Jesus wore, or walking exactly where he walked? No, it means we are to do the same works that Jesus did, and lots of his actions involved touching people who were wounded: laying hands on the eyes of the blind man, offering a healing touch to lepers, blessing the little children after others had tried to push them away. If you really and truly want to see Jesus, the story of Thomas compels us to look first for where there are scars around us. Perhaps this story is in the bible so that we'll be honest about naming our scars and more importantly in prompting us to reach out to touch and heal others where they are scarred; for in doing so, we will see Jesus.



Be honest: If this story weren't in the bible, would you ever really think about Jesus' scars? We know he was wounded by the act of being crucified, but we don't usually think about Jesus the risen Christ in terms of his wounds, except for this story. Yet it is by his scars the risen Lord is recognized. How many of you have scars? That is something concrete we all share with the resurrected Lord. Wouldn't living a life modeled after Christ involve touching, caressing and comforting others where they are scarred? Literally scarred: the wounded and weak and vulnerable. Emotionally and spiritually scarred: like Tamar, wounded and abandoned and abused by the men around her. Isn't that our calling? To touch the scars of one another, thereby recognizing our common brokenness, even as we trust in God's grace and love to make us whole. And it is in that act of touching scars that our eyes will be opened and we'll see the risen Lord. That's why this story is in the bible.

This Easter season, start there. See things in this way so you may come to believe, for by grace this is how the risen Christ is still being revealed to us even today.

AMEN

¹ Frank Bruni, "The Bleaker Sex," *New York Times*, April 1, 2012, p. SR3.

