

Touching the Wounds

TEXT: John 20:19-31

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on April 12, 2026

The first chapter of the Gospel of John, which is known as the Prologue, sets out several themes that reliably turn up in the stories and teachings of Jesus in the book. First, we get the theme of light and dark with the famous words of verse 5, “the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.”

The second theme is the glue holding the Gospel together, and is expressed by telling us that John the Baptist came, “as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.”

Not only is believing in Jesus a key theme for John, the very end of our reading this morning identifies it as the purpose for writing the gospel in the first place. It proclaims the words of the book “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.”

The word “believe” is used 98 times in the Gospel of John, which is more than the other three Gospels combined. John also limits its use to the verbal form. John never once talks about faith or belief as a noun. John’s purpose in writing is not to get people to profess a creed.

By using believe only as a verb, the book is implying that the actions that flow from believing in Jesus will give people new life—not in an afterlife; but in this life. That the worldview—the adjustment in focus and behavior—that comes from believing that the way of Jesus is the way of God—will bring abundant life, full of grace and truth; in the here and now. Which is, of course, something that Jesus claims as his purpose directly in John 10:10, “I have come that they might have life and have it more abundantly.”

The core of what this gospel means by believing in Jesus is in the book’s third theme, which is the only Christmas story we get in the book of John: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us.” The theological word for that is incarnation; and while John is the most philosophical and metaphysical of the four gospels, believing that the divine has come to earth enfleshed, incarnate, in a human body—not watching humanity from afar but becoming one of us and thereby one with us—is the thing that for John’s gospel triggers both abundant life and the unity of believers.

“The word made flesh” indicates embodied action; it is creation; it is birth. Turn the talk into the walk. And the claim is that in doing so, we will have not just life, but abundant life. We will be not just born, but born again.

Since the gospel tells us not just once but twice that it would be impossible to put everything that Jesus said and did into one book, and that this collection of stories about him are meant to convince people that Jesus was God in the flesh, it’s interesting to look at the stories that were selected through that lens.

One of the things you notice in doing that is that the disciple Thomas gets more airtime in John than anywhere else. He’s mentioned in other gospels in the list of Jesus’ twelve closest disciples, but he only gets speaking parts in John and here he gets not just one, but three, in addition to being name-checked as a disciple and being noted for one significant absence.

None of the gospels tells us about the calling of Thomas, so we don’t know how he came into the fold of Jesus’ disciples, what his profession was, who his parents were, or anything except that he was a twin. But his role in the fourth gospel seems to show us how someone came from doubt into belief—and it starts well before the passage Kim just read.

The first appearance of Thomas is in the story about the raising of Lazarus in John 11. When Jesus realizes that his close friend Lazarus has died, he tells his disciples he's going there to help people believe. Thomas tells the other disciples, "Let us also go that we might die with him."

We can't tell whether that is some Peter-level bravado or sarcasm; but in the event right before that at the end of John 10—in another instance of Jesus trying to get people to believe—they tried to stone him and arrest him and Jesus has to flee for his life. So whatever tone Thomas used, he had good reason to think they weren't headed to a sunlit hill to listen to the Beatitudes. He goes—he even encourages the others to go; but he's not in the "don't worry everything will be fine camp."

The second time we hear from Thomas is in John 14, during Jesus long speech to his disciples at the Last Supper. Again, it's only one line, but it's a line heard at thousands of funerals when Jesus has said he's leaving them but not to worry because the disciples know the way. Thomas pipes up to say, "uh...we don't know where you're going, so how can we know the way?" Reasonable question. And the answer is Jesus saying that he himself is the way. That, no doubt, raises more questions than it answers; and it probably deserves its own sermon, since I don't think it is intended to be exclusive in the way that it is typically used. But this is about Thomas who is again actively trying to figure out who Jesus is and what it means to believe in him and to follow him.

The third time Thomas gets some airtime is in the passage that Kim read, which includes two appearances of Jesus to his disciples, a week apart.

Remember that Mary Magdalene is the only one to see the risen Jesus on Easter morning in any of the gospels. The women in the other accounts get angels and while Peter and John run to the empty tomb when Mary tells them about it, they leave without seeing Jesus. Mary hangs around and Jesus appears to her alone.

The first opportunity anyone else gets to see him is Easter evening, when Jesus appears in the upper room where most of the disciples had been hiding since Thursday night. Perhaps there were others missing from that room when Jesus showed up, but the one the text calls out as absent is Thomas. We don't know why, but he wasn't being ostracized, since the others go to him right away and tell him what happened. But he doesn't believe it. Maybe he was too discouraged, too confused, too afraid to be with the others...we aren't told. But while Mary telling those gathered Easter morning that the tomb was empty Peter and John run to see for themselves, when Thomas hears that Jesus himself appeared that evening to all those gathered that night, Thomas simply doesn't believe it.

We're not told who exactly delivered the news to Thomas, but his response is that he won't believe until he can see and touch the wounds in Jesus' hands and side.

To be fair, even at that first appearance on Easter night, Jesus figured they needed some kind of proof and voluntarily showed them his wounds. But Thomas needed both to see and actually touch them for himself, and it's a full week later, when he finally is gathered with the others, that Jesus appears again and he gets his chance.

Jesus goes straight to Thomas and invites him to touch the wounds, which he does and, in doing so, recognizes Jesus, finally transitioning to the believing that the gospel is designed to promote when he responds, "My Lord and my God!"

Jesus makes a comment that some find kind of insulting to Thomas: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

While that whole scene led later Christians to call him "Doubting Thomas," I don't think Jesus' comment was meant to diminish him. Remember that "blessed" in Greek is also the word for "happy." And I think it's simply a truth about humanity in general that we live happier lives if we don't have to insist on proving every single thing for ourselves.

The current state of our world shows us the peril of never doing *any* fact checking for ourselves; but it's also true that living in this world of deep-fake videos, the loss of independent media, and powerful players undermining not just science but education itself, has not made us happy. Once we had to start reading the labels and looking for certifications on food because the product was labeled in a misleading way, which was decades ago, we became decidedly less blessed; and it has only gotten worse.

The need to verify everything before we act is not only a huge burden on everyday tasks like responding to an email or answering the phone; but it's a big impediment to human relationships.

Most people who make a marriage proposal believe it will be accepted; but you can't ever know that ahead of asking. We take on a job or a project believing that we are capable of doing it; but we don't really know if that's true until we've actually done it. Those who can't take a single step until they are absolutely certain of the outcome will live severely restricted lives and human interaction will be difficult at best.

Thomas lost an entire week of joy because he couldn't trust the unified voice of those he had just spent every day of the past three years with when they described what had happened Easter night. So, it's not that Jesus regarded Thomas as less worthy of blessing; I think he was saying that he'd be a happier man if he could trust his closest friends who all told the same story about something this important or if he had trusted Jesus on any of the several occasions when he predicted all this.

But I also think we generally miss a critical part of this story when we are only focused on Thomas. Here at the end of the gospel, we are getting a reminder of the themes of the prologue. Thomas was in the dark—he wasn't physically there to see; and like those who are blind, he needed to touch, in order to see. Then his eyes are opened and he comes to believe. And the thing that brought him to belief was not the word; but the word made flesh.

The resurrected Jesus, even a week past Easter, was still wounded. Not even scar tissue—open wounds that Thomas could put his hand into. Jesus shows his wounds in Luke, too, but only John puts an exclamation point on it with the Thomas story.

I think this story was included in John not just to trace the journey to believing in Thomas, but to emphasize the point the author makes in his prologue—that Jesus was the word made flesh. Flesh that can be wounded; flesh that can be touched.

By the time the fourth gospel was written, ideas had begun circulating that Jesus the man had died, but that the divine part of him had only entered his body at his baptism and had exited the body before his actual death, when Jesus says, "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit." And that morphed into a belief that bodies were a burden and inconsequential while the spirit alone was good and holy and eternal.

A resurrected Jesus that still had gaping wounds was a problem for that view; but it could still be explained away if they were just seen and not touched, as in Luke's version—a vision perhaps or a trick of the psyche. But Thomas insists on being physical. He wants to touch the wounds, put his fingers and hand right into them. The classical works of art for this scene are pretty gory.

I think John's gospel wants to refute that emerging division of flesh is bad and spirit is good idea and say, "No, the very Word of God was physically born, lived, died, was buried, and was resurrected as flesh and blood." It became the church doctrine the proclaims Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. Don't ask me how that's possible; I just work here. But the Gospel of John is all in on that project.

Last week, when I talked about my own beliefs about the resurrection, I said that a bodily resurrection was an important part of what I believed; not just because of what the Bible says in the stories about it, but because of the actions that belief inspires. A bodily resurrection is the proclamation that bodies are sacred and worthy of carrying God's spirit; which means that following Jesus requires treating literally every body with respect. I've known people more worried about respecting church furniture than respecting human bodies.

Jesus saw caring for the physical needs of bodies as sacred and holy work—the things that would be necessary to be judged worthy of heaven. And in continuing to carry his wounds in the post-resurrection narratives; Jesus continues to stand not just *for* but *with* all who bear the scars of their suffering for a lifetime.

Lastly, Jesus used his wounds as a sign of his identity, not a point of shame. No one in Luke or John—not even Thomas—has to ask Jesus to show them. He is not ashamed of the horrors that were forced upon him, even though shame and humiliation were part of the intention of those who inflicted them. Jesus shed the shame with his graveclothes; but he kept the wounds.

There are a disturbing number of people today who see woundedness as shameful, or even proof of sin, thus making someone less deserving of care. Whether it's disability or disease, the psychological wounds of abuse, the physical wounds from accidents or wars or other trauma; a resurrected Jesus still bearing his wounds, being willing to show them, and allowing people to touch them, puts Jesus in solidarity with the wounded while simultaneously lifting up the wounded as sacred.

I'm not saying there aren't other beliefs that can bring you to the same place; and it's also not to say that the events described are factual—they may be; I don't know. I wasn't there. But it is to say that I believe the events are *true*—true to who Jesus was, what he did, and what he taught—and that affirming them helps people discover and decide to travel the long and difficult road to healing our broken and suffering world while offering succor for the journey. And I'm here for that. Amen.