

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!
The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!

Please be seated. I am just about to celebrate my first year of being an Episcopalian and in that time I've enjoyed finding out all these new things about the Episcopalian tradition, most of which I love, apart from one thing, and that's today. I don't understand why in the Episcopal tradition the fourth Sunday of Easter is Good Shepherd's Sunday. If someone can explain to me why in the middle of the Easter season, we pause and have all these readings about sheep and shepherds, then please explain to me after the service.

I'm in full Easter mode and no talk of Good Shepherd's are going to put me off that, so I'm going to set aside talk of fluffy animals and shepherds, and I'm going to speak on a phrase that appears in our Epistle for today from Peter. We get this great Easter phrase, "By His wounds, you have been healed", and I want to offer some thoughts on the wounds of Jesus. It's a rich theme, many devotional writers have delved into the mystery of how it is, as the hymn writer says, that "By His stripes we are healed". How does what happened to Jesus all that time ago, still have an effect for us today? Why does the resurrected body of Jesus remain a wounded body? It's a theme picked up in our hymns, our final hymn, talks of the rich wounds in beauty glorified.

I've always been struck by the fact that when Jesus first appears to His disciples, He enters the room, says, "Peace be with you", and then shows them His hands and His side, and it's as the disciples see His hands and His side, that they recognize Him. Jesus is recognized by His wounds, and part of me can identify with this. I could take you ... it wouldn't be a pleasant experience, but I could take you on a guided tour on the scars of my body: the cut I got playing rugby above my eye, the one I got last year on my head when I tripped over some clutter in our house ... Laura... the scars on my knees that I got playing hockey as a teenager. I've got one long one on my thigh that I got when I was six. I was playing in my friend's, Martin, garden. We were carrying a plank of wood, there was a nail at my end and he dropped his end and so the nail went all the way down the inside of my thigh and I can remember the skin was all rolled up and I got in the bath and my mother took a pin and unrolled the skin. I can still remember it, as I was writhing in pain.

I reckon...yeah, sorry about that....I reckon we could each tell each other stories of the wounds that we're carrying. They're part of our uniqueness. They tell a

story. So it is with Jesus. He showed them His wounds and they recognized Him, and I think there's something very interesting about this. This is after the resurrection and Jesus is still baring the scars of His crucifixion. Wouldn't you have thought that a resurrected body would be healed of all its wounds? Surely a victorious body like Christ, a body that had conquered sin and death, a body that's been broken and raised to new life, a radiant new life would be whole and without blemish.

Well, obviously not. The resurrected body of Jesus is still scarred. And there's something deeply significant about this, which I think speaks to our situation. The resurrected body of Jesus still bears the scars of His crucifixion. As our anthem says, Christ is the same. The earthly Jesus is the same as the resurrected Jesus. There's a continuity there. It says, "As of old His body bears the marks of love in triumph glorified". Jesus took His wounds with Him into heaven. Thinking about the wounds of Jesus on the body of the risen and ascended Christ, helps us to hold together the main elements of the Easter story, namely, the crucifixion and the resurrection, and they need to be held together because without both of them, the Easter story on which our faith is based does not make sense.

And it's good for us in our church, because our sanctuary is dominated behind me by this image of Christus Rex. Christ rising and reigning in glory, but a risen Christ still with the cross. That image holds together for us, the crucifixion and the resurrection. I was involved in a discussion once in the church school, which got quite heated. It was about what kind of cross we should put in the school. It was a church school, we felt it should be identified as such, but the question was what kind of cross? Some felt strongly that they wanted a cross that was empty to show that Jesus had been raised and the story didn't end with the cross. And some others wanted a cross on which the crucified Jesus remained, and it made me think that there are some of us, indeed there are church traditions which are content to leave Jesus on the cross.

I remember I had a vicar once who came back very frustrated from a meeting at which he'd been asked to speak. He'd been asked to speak to a healing prayer group and obviously been asked to speak on the subject of healing, and he talked about the risen Christ and he took as his text the story of Jesus coming to the disciples and showing them His wounds. And he suggested that this was a source of hope for our own wounds. He tried to encourage a vision of victory, of Christ's love in and through our wounds.

However, the discussion that followed was dominated by stories of people struggling courageously with terrible illness and tragedy and it was all very moving and spoke of God's grace, but he couldn't help realize that the group had asked him to speak about healing when all the discussion was about suffering. They'd lost sight of the wounded and victorious Christ, and that can happen to all of us. We get to love our wounds. They hold us back sometimes, when we let them define who we are, and we can get comfortable with that. I'll never forget seeing in the news one day the story of a prison and there'd been a riot and the prisoners had climbed up onto the roof and unfolded a banner which said, "The prison is ours". Their horizons had become so small, that they'd lost sight of life beyond the prison. Who wants to claim that the prison is theirs?

And do you remember the film "Life of Brian", that's the one where Brian ... at one point he's passing a row of filthy beggars and in the middle of them is an obviously healthy man in a dazzling white loin cloth and he cries out, "Penny for an ex-leper", and he complains that he used to make a good living begging until someone called Jesus came along and healed him. His wounds had been a source of security and income for him, and in a way we can all come to love our wounds in an unhealthy way, and when that happens, we lose our desire to grow and be transformed by the Spirit of the living risen Christ who longs to bring us life, a life in abundance it says in the Gospel.

So that's one danger, and I should also say that just as the cross can't be emphasized without the resurrection, so we can't emphasize the resurrection without the cross, and the clearest example of that I've ever had was when one of our friends called John, lost his father tragically in a cycling accident. And John's family and his parents were very significant Christian leaders, and their mother sent out a letter informing us of the death of her husband. And the letter was full of how pleased they were that he'd been taken into glory and what a blessing it was for all of them that he'd gone this way, and it was just this very triumphalist tone, which rather grated, at least on me, because there was no mention of the pain of the situation, of their loss, and yes we can celebrate the passing of a loved one into glory, but that doesn't mean that we need to exclude or hide or ignore the pain that invariably goes with that amongst those who are left behind. When the British Armed Forces returned victorious from the Falklands War under Mrs. Thatcher, the most wounded and disfigured soldiers were kept away from the press photographers. No signs of their wounds were allowed to spoil the celebrations.

There was to be no reminder that that victory came at a great and terrible cost.

And I hope that we as a church community can find expression for the pain and struggle that many experience. That we can find room for that without losing hope, and I'd like to think that we can celebrate the hope and victory that Jesus has won for us without neglecting those who suffer, and without acknowledging the pain that so often accompanies our life and the lives of people around us. And one way we can do that is to ensure that in our services we remember in our prayers those who are not able to celebrate.

So let me end by drawing out two points that follow from all this. The first is about our identity and how we understand ourselves and who we are. If we can hold together the reality of Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection, then we'll be a long way to understanding who we truly are as new creations in Him. We'll be able to live honestly with our own wounds, neither holding on to them and being defined by them, nor by pretending that they're not there. Because of what Jesus has done for us on the cross and in His resurrection, we have the promise of victory, of being made new. But we, like Jesus, will carry our wounds with us even though they are wounds which have been healed.

And secondly, in Luke's Gospel, Jesus's final resurrection appearance is His ascension, His going back to heaven. It says, "Jesus lifted up His hands and blessed them". And these are the same scarred hands by which the disciples first recognized Jesus. He then ascends in the same glorified and wounded body.

Someone called Jesus the wounded man in the heavens, and it is a wonderful thought that the Lord to whom we pray, the one who intercedes for us on our behalf, still bears in His body the wounds of human suffering. Saint Bede said, "When Christ pleads for us with the Father, He always shows the manner of His death for us". The scars of human torment are forever present on God's right hand, and that should be a great encouragement for us to pray. We pray to one who has known the pain of human condition, even forever bears the marks of that pain. So when we come forward for communion today, remember that we kneel before a wounded Healer. See if you can perceive for yourself the wounds on the body of the risen Jesus.

Amen.