

## Easter 3 Sermon

### Jesus Shows Thomas the Marks on His Hands and Side

Then [Jesus] said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side."

John 20:27

The encounter between Jesus and Thomas described in the Gospel of John has inspired people throughout history. Many pages of theological reflection have been written exploring its meaning, litanies of devotion and worship have been developed around the marks or wounds of Jesus shown to Thomas, and diverse forms of artistic expression have tried to depict in art this wonder-filled moment. One can see why this has been such an inspiring scene in the Gospel of John: it is an intimate, mysterious, and perhaps even unsettling encounter. The risen Jesus appears to Thomas and shows him the marks on his hands and his side. And then, Jesus doesn't just invite Thomas to reach out his hand and put it in his side, rather, as the use of imperative verbs in the Greek suggests, he commands or implores Thomas to put his finger in his side.<sup>1</sup> As we continue our series of 40 days of wonder this morning, we are invited to imagine ourselves as characters in that room of wonder and mystery. Are we Thomas? Are we one of the disciples watching? In this moment we encounter the risen Lord as marked; marked by the wounds that came from his crucifixion. And, we wonder: what can we learn about resurrection life from encountering a Jesus triumphant and victorious over death but still carrying the marks of his passion *in* his risen life?

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<sup>1</sup> Jesus' request to Thomas is expressed in the imperative case: "Bring" and "Put" are not simple verbal invitations but imperative commands.

This morning as we explore this Gospel text, I am going to be drawing heavily from the work of theologian and professor Shelly Rambo. In her book *Resurrecting Wounds: Living in the Afterlife of Trauma*, Rambo notes that this story from the Gospel of John has often been read through an understanding of resurrection and redemption that suggests that if life “is to triumph over death, [it] must not retain the marks of death. Wounds must be erased.”<sup>2</sup> It might seem odd to think that a story about Jesus showing Thomas the marks on his hands and side would be read in such a way as to “erase” the wounds Jesus displays, but that is exactly what Rambo claims has too often happened in readings of this encounter. After all, I suspect that everyone in this room would not know this story as the story of “Jesus showing Thomas the Marks on His Hands and Side” or “Thomas puts his hand in Jesus’ side.” Rather, as Rambo notes, that the common title of this story is “the doubting Thomas story.”<sup>3</sup> With this title, the story is framed not at all about wounds or woundedness or the significance of the marks remaining on Jesus’ risen body, but rather a story about not doubting and having faith. Rambo sums up the common reading this way: “[w]hen Thomas encounters the risen Christ, he is moved to faith by the miracle of the resurrection. His doubt is overcome.”<sup>4</sup> The result, Rambo says, is the story is a story of “Triumph. Truth. Certainty. Conclusion.”<sup>5</sup>

Reading the encounter between Jesus and Thomas through the lens of trauma studies, Rambo suggests that “[w]hat is lost in this reading is the possibility that resurrection could speak in the meantime, in the in-between spaces of human life.”<sup>6</sup> Those “in-between spaces” are spaces of the presence of wounds and of death amidst life; spaces of ongoing struggle, uncertainty, and

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<sup>2</sup> *Resurrecting Wounds*, 36.

<sup>3</sup> *Resurrecting Wounds*, 18.

<sup>4</sup> *Resurrecting Wounds*, 18.

<sup>5</sup> *Resurrecting Wounds*, 19.

<sup>6</sup> *Resurrecting Wounds*, 36.

mystery; and also, spaces of possibility for new birth. Throughout her book, Rambo explores where the mystery of this encounter between Jesus and Thomas might lead us if we refuse to read this story as a simple moral tale about how you should not doubt but have faith. If we take up her invitation, we might just see in this story a story about our personal and corporate woundedness as well as the wounds we have individually and socially inflicted on others. We might also discover the positive possibilities for healing that come when we learn to see how our woundedness can draw us into a shared journey together in the in-between spaces of life.

Early on in her book, Rambo directs our attention to the ways that different artistic interpretations of the encounter between Jesus and Thomas have either encouraged or challenged the common, “doubting Thomas” reading of this story.<sup>7</sup> Take, for example, the famous Dutch painter Rembrandt’s *The Incredulity of St. Thomas*.



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<sup>7</sup> *Resurrecting Wounds*, 19.

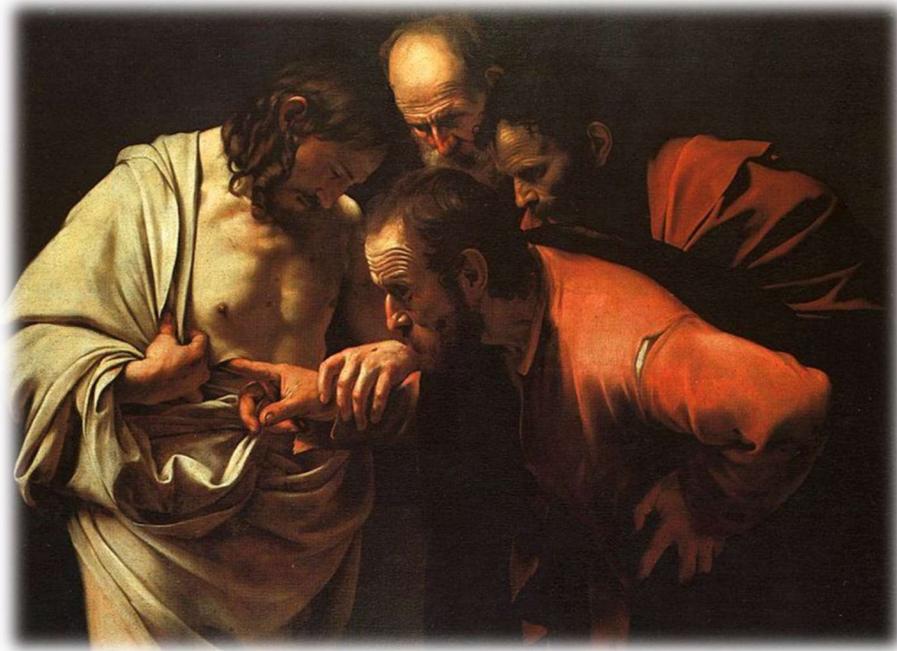
In this artistic portrayal of the scene, Jesus gestures towards the open wound on his side and Thomas recoils, hands up. The wound, while visibly present and indeed even at the center of the painting, is not investigated by Thomas. The Gospel of John does not tell us whether Thomas actually puts his hand in Jesus' side and so it has been up to interpreters and artists to decide this point. For Rembrandt, Thomas doesn't go through with it. Perhaps the suggestion is that Thomas didn't *need* to go through with it. Is this the moment, for Rembrandt, where Thomas says, "My Lord and My God" and comes to faith without needing to investigate the wound or even see it any longer since the truth has come? This would accord well with the more common reading of this encounter as primarily about the movement from doubt in the resurrection to faith.

Later theological interpreters such as the sixteenth century Protestant Reformer John Calvin supported the view that this encounter was all about the movement from doubt to faith. For Calvin, the primary point was that Thomas came to believe in the resurrection and that the resurrection confirmed that Jesus was both God and man. Calvin even went so far as to suggest that the wounds on Jesus' body were temporary, remaining only for a time to accommodate Thomas's doubting and then after that, they were gone, erased from Jesus' glorified body.<sup>8</sup> In this reading, the wounds were purely instrumental for encouraging belief but they mattered not after that, and they certainly were *not* there for Thomas or the other disciples to wonder at, or to learn more from.

The interpretation that downplays the significance of the wounds in this encounter is challenged by the artistic portrayal of the scene by the Italian painter Carrivagio.

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<sup>8</sup> *Resurrecting Wounds*, 30. Rambo's analysis of Calvin is helpful in spelling out the problem of the common reading.



In Carrivagio's depiction, Jesus is seen drawing Thomas' hand to his side, pressing his finger into his flesh. Thomas, instead of recoiling in a flash of understanding and acknowledgment, looks almost frozen or dazed by it all. Instead of a dazzling ray of light shooting out from Jesus, there is more darkness to the picture, with a subtle, warm light around Jesus. Here the wounds and the physical encounter between Jesus and Thomas around those wounds are brought into stark focus. It is a more intimate, even unsettling encounter with more wonder and mystery to it, leaving open to us more interpretive possibilities for finding meaning in this shared moment between Jesus, Thomas, and the disciples.

But what of those interpretive possibilities? What else can we learn from this encounter if it is not only an encounter that moves Thomas from intellectual doubt to the openness of faith? If we take our cue from Rambo, a renewed focus on the *wounds* or the *marks* on Jesus' body is called for. However, even here, with this focus, she admits there are certain dangers. If the common reading of the Thomas story takes out all of the mystery present in this encounter by reducing the story to a tale about moving from doubt to faith, a focus on Jesus' wounds might

lead us on the flip side into a kind of unhealthy veneration of the wounds and the suffering that produced them. We might start to think that wounds are not only a tragic part of life in a fallen world, but that somehow, they are necessary and even good, all a part of God's plan.<sup>9</sup>

Several weeks back on Palm Sunday, Laurel referred to this unhealthy veneration of wounds when she challenged us to think differently about the atonement, about the relationship between Jesus' suffering and death on the cross and the reconciling work of God that makes us one with God again. In her sermon, Laurel challenged us to see that the Gospel is not first or principally that God came to earth in Jesus to suffer and die so we could be reconciled to God, but also and perhaps most profoundly that God came to earth in Jesus to be Emmanuel, God with us living a fully human life, living rightly with God and neighbour. Of course, the mission of Jesus, of being fully human—of living in right relationship with each other and God—clashes with our world of sin, and so Jesus' life of service and healing led him to the cross. But it was not *the suffering* on the cross that was itself the redemption, rather, it was Jesus' gift of his whole life, lived fully in service to God and neighbor—that was the redemption. God's vindication of Jesus in the resurrection is not the glorification of his suffering, but the vindication of the way of his life.

While a focus on the wounds of the risen Jesus clearly has its dangers if they are revered in their own right, nonetheless, Rambo worries that the alternative of erasing them threatens “to promote an ideal that is equally” bad for everyone, but especially for those who throughout history have been perpetually mistreated and underprivileged.<sup>10</sup> After all, bodies are marked in different ways from the different experiences of life and to ignore or seek to erase those marks

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<sup>9</sup> Rambo points out that narratives of “redemptive suffering” have been challenged by feminist theologians who have rightly critiqued some Christian visions of redemption that tell women that their suffering is a necessary part of their salvation.

<sup>10</sup> *Resurrecting Wounds*, 63.

could be used to cover over or hide individual and social wounds caused by injustice on the one hand or, on the other hand, erasing wounds could serve an unhealthy obsession with “ideal, perfect bodies.”<sup>11</sup> Jesus’ return with marks on his body not only challenges societal ideals of “normal” or “able” bodies, but also draws us to reflect on the ways that past wounds “live on,” “surface,” or have an “after-life” in the present.<sup>12</sup> Rambo wonders in light of all of this: “Is there a way to ‘work through’ wounds without reinscribing them as negative marks of identity?”<sup>13</sup> How can wounds be surfaced and touched in such a way that opens possibilities for re-birth and healing rather than causing ongoing harm?

While there is not enough time in a sermon to share with you all of Rambo’s wonderful and profound ways of ‘working through’ wounds in her book, I will briefly offer up just two examples that she provides that I find profound and that I think might help us as we consider what we can learn from the encounter between Jesus and Thomas, and specifically Jesus’ invitation to touch his side wound. First, Rambo suggests that working through wounds will involve coming to terms with our involvement in wounding others, both personally and at a social level, and coming to “revalue” lives that we have too often ignored or devalued.<sup>14</sup> She puts it this way:

The invitation to Thomas has an element of confrontation, in that Thomas has to face his own complicity in a logic that devalues certain lives... Touching wounds, then, can be an image of reinscribing value—a vision of fierce care—in which an undomesticated vision of the fight to claim life under new terms is inaugurated. Jesus’ return gathers the community around a new ethic. Touch symbolizes revaluation.<sup>15</sup>

She continues:

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<sup>11</sup> *Resurrecting Wounds*, 63.

<sup>12</sup> *Resurrecting Wounds*, 77-78.

<sup>13</sup> *Resurrecting Wounds*, 63.

<sup>14</sup> Rambo’s analysis is based on her engagement with womanist scholar Delores Williams.

<sup>15</sup> *Resurrecting Wounds*, 102.

The good news is that the ministerial vision that put Jesus on the cross, that threatened the powers and principalities of his day, could not be crushed. Instead, the wounds return, both as a symbol of survival and a symbol of the...work facing the new community.<sup>16</sup>

One way of summing Rambo's insight would be to say: **Jesus' wounds challenge us to confront our tendencies to wound and asks us to revalue those we have devalued, seeing them as strong survivors of a world that has been unkind to them.**

Second, Rambo suggests that working through wounds will involve an openness to the transfiguration or transformation of our own wounds into scars. These scars, says Rambo, don't "expose the memory of suffering," but "protect, cover, and witness" that memory together with others in a shared life.<sup>17</sup> Because these scars are protected, covered, and witnessed in community, they become sites for possibilities of rebirth "*in the midst of life.*"<sup>18</sup> Too often the vision of healing in our world focuses either on a kind of total overcoming of our woundedness, limitations, and dependence on one another now or this vision relegates such healing to a distant hereafter. But the "healing" on display on the marked body of the risen Jesus, Rambo suggests, "cannot be aligned with [an ideal of] perfection...[that] praises those who come away 'unmarked.'"<sup>19</sup> Jesus' return to the disciples, alive again, is a 'marked' return.

To further illustrate her point, Rambo retells the wonderful story of a fourth century Saint named Macrina.<sup>20</sup> At one point in her life, Macrina, who lived with her mother in a monastery, had developed a mass on her chest. Overcome with grief and pain from this discovery, Macrina's tears fell to the ground as she prayed, and her tears mixed with the dirt to make mud. From the mixture, Macrina made a balm to rub on the mass. Returning to her mother Emmelia, Macrina

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<sup>16</sup> *Resurrecting Wounds*, 103.

<sup>17</sup> *Resurrecting Wounds*, 69.

<sup>18</sup> *Resurrecting Wounds*, 69.

<sup>19</sup> *Resurrecting Wounds*, 63.

<sup>20</sup> The story comes down to us through the narration of her brother, Gregory of Nyssa.

asked her to reach out her hand to make the sign of the cross on the mud-covered mass. In her reading of this story, Rambo notices the way that the figures of Jesus and Thomas are re-figured in Macrina and Emmelia; daughter and mother, a hand reaching out to touch the site of woundedness. Miraculously, after making the sign of the cross, the mass disappeared. But *a mark* remained in the place where Emmelia had made the sign of the cross.

What stands out to Rambo in this story is that the mark or scar that appeared on Macrina's skin did not come *from the internal wound* but rather from "its exterior witness" by her mother. Rambo describes the impact of the scar this way:

The scar does not turn us back into the wound but, instead, focuses the work of healing on the surface of the skin. The gaze [our looking only with our eyes] is disrupted, and the scene is focused on other senses; here, on the touch between daughter and mother.<sup>21</sup>

A little later, Rambo draws out the significance of this reading in relation to the story from the Gospel of John:

Could the mother-daughter interaction point us to a different interpretation of this passage, interpreting resurrection not as a triumphant claim that garners the unique truth of Christianity but that links those within this tradition to the vision of healing so central to the narrative of Jesus' life? The plunging finger of Thomas that seeks to secure belief is transfigured into the healing fingers—changing the 'truth' that emerges from a reading of this scene.<sup>22</sup>

Rambo's powerful interpretation could be summed up this way: **Jesus' invitation to Thomas to reach out his hand and put it in his side, draws him and the watching disciples into a shared journey of healing together in the in-between of life.** Resurrection life, in this understanding, should not be interpreted as a hope for a far-off future healing, but rather hope for moments of healing that come through "the weaving of community" in the here and now.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Resurrecting Wounds*, 47.

<sup>22</sup> *Resurrecting Wounds*, 52.

<sup>23</sup> *Resurrecting Wounds*, 68.

To close this time of reflection, I invite you to enter a time of prayer with me. And throughout the prayer, I invite you also as you are comfortable, to close your eyes and to place a finger on your open palm or on your side, whatever you prefer. This is a tangible way of praying through this scripture passage together. Throughout the prayer whenever I speak the words “we say to you,” I ask us to join in the refrain, saying: **My Lord and My God**. Join me in prayer.

Lord Jesus, we find ourselves with you today in the in-between spaces of life and we say to you:

**My Lord and My God!**

We hear your invitation to reach out our hand towards the wounded, and we feel your challenge to repent from our ways of wounding and devaluing others around us. We say to you: **My Lord and My God!**

As we reach out our hand towards the wounded, we acknowledge our own wounds. As we share our wounds with you and with trusted friends and helpers, help us to be a community that “protects, covers, and witnesses” wounds. Weave us together into a community of healing love.

We say to you: **My Lord and My God!**

AMEN