



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER, APRIL 14, 2024
ACTS 3:12-19; PSALM 4; 1 JOHN 3:1-7; LUKE 24:36B-48

ONLY A SUFFERING GOD CAN HELP

***Luke 24:36b-48** [Jesus himself stood among the disciples and said to them, “Peace be with you.” They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, “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.” And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence. Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.]*

I have only one sibling, my brother Jack, who is three and half years younger than me. We are very different, but we have the same speaking voice and many similar mannerisms. He is a philosophy professor. Jack was diagnosed with a rare genetic disorder when he was 6 months old, and this has affected his health for much of his life. Now that his body is aging, he is

having more health challenges. His declining health has impacted his ability to work, and this is greatly diminishing his quality of life. He has good days, and bad days. Because he’s a philosopher and a believer, he reflects upon his experience, and this causes spiritual pain. He called me during Holy Week at a particularly low moment. “I don’t know how much longer

I can live like this, Rich,” he said. “I’m being defined by my illness and disability. I want to believe, but I don’t know where God is in all of this.” I wanted to explain it away, give him answers for why this was happening to him, but I couldn’t. My heart broke. This is my little brother, and he is suffering. He’s in Cleveland, and I’m in Seattle. All I could do was listen, enter this painful space with him, and assure him that he’s not alone. But I felt powerless and helpless to change his situation, because I was. I still am.

I carried Jack’s pain and my sense of helplessness with me through the days of Holy Week. It was very powerful. I followed Jesus from his triumphant entry into Jerusalem to the cross on Palm Sunday. I felt his transformative love on Maundy Thursday. I wept when I bowed to, kissed, and then embraced the cross on Good Friday. I tried to leave some of Jack’s suffering and my helplessness on that cross. I sat with pain and uncertainty outside the tomb on Holy Saturday and felt the joy of the resurrection at the Easter Vigil. On Easter Sunday I experienced exceeding joy, helplessness, and sadness, at the same time. I had a sense that all of this was gathered up into the Resurrection experience. And now, in the Easter season, we are presented with Gospel stories of the Resurrected Jesus and what does he do?

He shows us his wounds. He is glorified and damaged, exalted and wounded. In today’s Gospel, Jesus assures his terrified friends that he isn’t a ghost, and he proves this by showing them his wounded body and by eating a piece of fish.

What’s remarkable about Jesus is that he chooses the most revealing aspect of himself to share first. His hands and feet bear unmistakable signs of his crucifixion, his defeat, and his vulnerability. They’re not mended and manicured; I imagine that after three days his wounds are still raw and gaping. I think it’s theologically significant that Jesus shows us a resurrected body that is wounded and visibly broken. Theologian Nancy Eiesland says that the Resurrected Jesus “bears the marks of profound physical impairment.” She goes on to say, “In presenting his impaired body to his startled friends the resurrected Jesus is revealed as the disabled God.”¹ His injuries remain an essential part of his resurrected identity.

What would it be like for us to imagine or follow in the footsteps of a disabled God? What would it be like to lead with our scars, instead of enslaving ourselves to society’s expectations of perfection and prettiness? Jesus proved that he was alive and approachable by risking real engagement. Real presence. As in: "Here is

how you can recognize me. By my hands and my feet. See? I have scars. I have baggage. I have history. I am alive to pain, just as you are. I am not immune; I am real.” That’s a Real Presence I can get behind.

In August 2006, I left my affluent parish on the east side of Columbus, Ohio to enter a residential treatment program for alcoholism. I was miserable, frightened, and ashamed. I felt like an abject failure. I was defeated and faithless. My fellows and I were transported around Rochester, Minnesota in a tell-tale white¹² passenger van from one AA meeting to another. The meetings often took place in churches. One Roman Catholic church had a little gift shop next to the large hall where our meetings took place. I wandered into the religious goods shop looking for symbols and artifacts that might supplant the faith that I couldn’t muster. A kindly older woman approached me and asked if she could help me. I burst into tears. Then she walked over to a jewelry case, rummaged around for a minute, and came back with a crucifix on a silver chain. A tiny Jesus hung on his cross, his face drawn in pain. “Wear this,” she said, pressing the necklace into my hands. “Only a suffering God can help.”

The line belongs to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran Pastor who was

executed by the Nazis for resisting their reign of terror. Supposedly a prison guard found a piece of paper with the line scribbled on it and smuggled it out of Bonhoeffer's cell shortly before his death. *Only a suffering God can help.*ⁱⁱ *This broken, suffering God helped me.*

The paradox of resurrection is that Jesus's *scarred* body comforted his disciples. His wounded hands and feet pulled them out of disbelief and into radical, life-altering faith. We dare not treat this fact lightly, because it testifies to a great mystery. As theologian James Alison puts it, Jesus didn’t simply erase death, he carried death’s “shell” on his living body, rendering his scars a trophy — a sign of life’s ultimate and lasting victory. “What type of life is it,” Alison asks in awe, “that is capable not of canceling death out, which would be to stay on the same level as it, but to include it, making a trophy of it, allowing it to be something that can be shown to others in order to allay their fears?”ⁱⁱⁱ

If even at the apex of his resurrection victory, Jesus’ witness was a witness of scars, then maybe we should take heed. Maybe when the world looks at us to see if we are real, to see if the Jesus we love and the faith we profess is truly approachable and trustworthy, they need to see our scars more than our perfection. Our

vulnerability, not our triumphalism. Wounds aren't pretty, and no, they don't tell the whole story of the Christian journey. But the stories they do tell are holy. Jesus didn't hide the bloody and the broken. Neither should we. Wounded, disabled, and scarred. This is our God.

This is Resurrection. This is the Word made Flesh. May we be witnesses of these things.



SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL

ⁱ Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberation Theology of Disability*. Abingdon Press, First Edition, 1994.

ⁱⁱ This is a common and well-known quote from Bonhoeffer. I do not know its origin but brianzahnd.com commented on it here ["Only the Suffering God Can Help" - Brian Zahnd](#).

ⁱⁱⁱ Alison, James. *Knowing Jesus*. SPCK Publishing, 2012.