

If you come up to me after today's service and have a close look above my left eye, you'll see that there is an inch-long gash right at the corner of my left brow. I cannot remember exactly *when* I acquired this – it must have been some time when I was still an unruly little boy. (I am now an unruly middle aged man!) But I do remember exactly *how* I got this scar. I was having a wrestling match with my maternal uncle on a double bed with an iron frame. I must have decided that conventional tactics were useless against someone who was well over 5 foot 10. So I launched myself at him as a human cannon ball, whereupon he moved out of the way, leaving me to career towards the iron frame. There followed a very loud scream, blood everywhere, and a decorated eye brow for life. In that way, this little bit of my history is written permanently into my body.

All of us have our history written into our bodies – whether it is scars from fights with one's uncle, or scars left by the surgeon's knife; whether it be stretch marks or wrinkles; whether it be physical scars on our outer flesh or mental scars imprinted in the folds of our brains; our personal histories are imprinted on our bodies. So much so that someone once said that middle age is when a person finally gets the look that they deserve – a person's face and their whole way of carrying themselves tell us their history, what others have done to them, what they have done to themselves.

And how we dislike that. Go into any pharmacist and you'll know what I mean. The shelves are full of products to help us disguise the history that our bodies tell, or at least delay their appearance. And when we see someone with obvious deformities in their bodies out and about in public, we feel embarrassed and uncomfortable, not knowing quite whether to look or to look away. It seems that we are not only embarrassed about our own bodily imperfections, but also about the bodily imperfections of others. But there is no escaping it: our bodies carry our history.

And this is true not only of us, but also of the risen Jesus. We know this because of the unique resurrection story that Saint John tells us in his Gospel – the passage that was read to us just now. The main character of this story, the apostle Thomas, gets very bad press. Because of he demanded to see and touch the risen Jesus before he would believe the resurrection, he has forever been known as 'doubting Thomas'. But the reputation is not justified. If I have a little longer, I could go through the whole of John chapter 20 with you, and show you that each single person in this chapter came to believe in the resurrection because of sight, and, in the case of Mary Magdalene, who held onto Jesus outside the empty tomb, because of touch. Thomas merely asked to be treated the same way as

everyone else. And indeed, when he finally encountered the risen Jesus, Thomas came to a fuller conclusion than all of his friends put together. They called the risen Jesus ‘Rabounni’ or ‘Lord’ – familiar titles from the days of his earthly ministry. Uniquely, Thomas exclaimed in front of the risen Jesus, ‘My Lord *and my God!*’ Thomas was the first to realise that the one standing in front of him was far more than the friend he thought he had lost; the one confronting him was one in whom the fullness of God dwells: ‘My Lord ...’, yes, the Lord that Thomas knew before, but also ‘my God!’.

We don’t know exactly why Thomas was able to reach this amazing conclusion before all of his friends. All of them have seen the risen Jesus, too. But it is intriguing that Thomas’ encounter with Jesus apparently focussed on an aspect that the others were not bothered about. You remember how the other apostles told Thomas that they had seen Jesus. Here is his response:

‘Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in the side, I will not believe.’

For whatever reason, the confirmation that Thomas wanted was evidence that the body of the risen Jesus still carried his history, in fact, his recent history – those horrendous scars that the Roman soldier inflicted just a few days ago. Presumably the other had told him about these scars, because Jesus pointedly showed them these when he met them:

Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, *he showed them his hands and his side.*

And Jesus did exactly the same when he met Thomas a week later:

Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side.”

Notice, by the way, that the text does *not* say that Thomas actually took the opportunity offered. He presumably saw, but the text did not say that he actually touched. Instead, John had Thomas say immediately after Jesus’ offer: ‘My Lord and my God!’ Be that as it may, what I want you to notice is that on both occasions, Jesus showed the disciples the scars on his body.

We've got so used to the idea that the glorified body of the risen Jesus should carry these scars that it has ceased to surprise us. But it should surprise us, especially us who live in a culture that spends millions to disguise the scars of bodily history. If *we* were God, we would undoubtedly have made those scars disappear from Jesus' risen body – scars that apparently speak of weakness and defeat on Jesus' part, and cruelty and inhumanity on the part of his enemies. Surely Happy Easter should be the occasion to *forget* those ugly things. But God had other ideas. The glorified body of his resurrected Son still carried its history. Emphasising this point seems to be a Johannine thing. Later, in the Book of Revelation, when John reported to us his vision of worship in heaven, we read this:

Then I saw the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered ...

Not just 'a Lamb standing', but 'a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered ...' We are surely talking about scars again. In other words, the risen Jesus has taken his scarred body right into the heart of God. A stupendous thought that is captured musically by that glorious hymn 'Crown him with many crowns', where in the very last verse we sing:

Crown him the Lord of love;
Behold his hands and side –
Rich wounds, yet visible above,
In beauty glorified.

Those 'wounds, yet visible above' were precisely what Thomas sought to see, and was invited to see. The risen Jesus brings these disfigurements with him into his new life as the first fruit of the new creation.

That, I believe, is a liberating truth. If we truly believe in *this* version of the resurrection, and not the version that we would have dreamt up, with a scar-free body for the risen Jesus, then we should know that the scars our own bodies carry should neither embarrass us *nor* define us, because in the resurrection, God declares God's intention to transform all of us from glory into glory *as scarred bodies*. Indeed, in so far as we carry scars on our own bodies, big or small, we are icons of Christ.

Saint Paul implied as much when he ends his letter to the Galatians by saying that he bears on his body 'the marks of Christ' (6:17). The Greek word there was 'stigmata' – now we use this word to refer precisely those marks on Jesus' hands and feet that Thomas wanted to see. Paul's

stigmata were the scars and wounds that he received in his work as an apostle. Later, Saint Francis of Assisi was reported to have received literal stigmata on his body – miraculous wounds corresponding to the wounds of Christ. For Paul and for Francis, their stigmata were what marked them out as Christ bearers. For us, too often, we think of our scars as stigmas in the English sense of the word, as something to be ashamed of, to be hidden or disguised or, better still, transformed out of existence by technology. Such an attitude towards our own scars and disfigurements then translates into embarrassment and disgust about the scars and disfigurement of others: the hastily avoided look, and a deafening silence.

The resurrection, the *real* resurrection that Thomas and others experienced, puts pay to all that. In the light of *this* resurrection of the Son of God, we may finally learn to affirm that on the one hand, our scars are us, but on the other hand, they need not, and indeed in God's love, do not, have the final word on our identity.

Let us pray:

Crown him the Lord of love;
Behold his hands and side –
Rich wounds, yet visible above,
In beauty glorified.
All hail, Redeemer, hail!
For thou hast died for me;
Thy praise and glory shall not fail
Throughout eternity.

Amen.