

# Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

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Second Sunday of Easter

John 20:19-23

## Jesus Appears: Scars and All

Of all the different aspects of the Christian faith – Jesus' birth, his miracles, prayer, creation, etc... – the one that is most important to me, personally, is the resurrection. Because in the resurrection, death, evil, injustice are all overcome. Easter says that God's good purposes will not be defeated, that God has triumphed.

Today, we heard about the first appearance of the resurrected Jesus to the disciples – intense and focused – the scene set with realistic detail. It is the evening of the first day of the week, and the doors are locked. The anxious disciples are shut tightly inside. The suspicious world is shut tightly outside.

Then all of a sudden, he appears. Defying locked doors and locked hearts and locked vision, Jesus simply appears. But they don't know him. He spoke to them, as he had spoken so often before, saying "Peace." But they still don't know him. Then, "He showed them his hands and his side." He showed them his scars and then, only then, they saw, they recognized, and they rejoiced.

Their dead Jesus is resurrected. Their dead faith is restored. Their dead hope is born again.

And I think it is so interesting that the risen Christ has scars. Being raised from the dead did not erase them. The Christ of Easter bears the scars of Good Friday.

Jesus has just gone from death to life; he has walked from the tomb triumphant. And yet in his risen body, the disciples do not recognize him. It is only when he shows them his scars that they know him.

Easter, the stunning triumph of God, the great victory over death and defeat, heals wounds but it does not erase the scars.

So, what does that mean for us? That the resurrection heals wounds, but doesn't erase scars?

I think it has to do with the reality of it all – for Jesus and for us. It has to do with God becoming human. Not simply hovering above the heartache of the world, but embracing the pain, touching the cares and sorrows of this life, living as we live, and dying as we die.

In my first church, there was a student in a confirmation class who seemed confused and distant during our first few classes. We finally figured out why it didn't seem to "click" with her when she asked us, "You mean all the stuff in the Bible actually happened? I thought all the stories, people and happenings took place in heaven. You mean it's real?"

YES! Jesus was God, but he was also fully human. And even in his risen body, he had human scars.

Early on in the church, there was a heresy called Docetism. Docetism said that Jesus did not really suffer on the cross, did not really live like we live on earth. He only appeared to suffer, only appeared to be human.

Here is what the German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer said about this misunderstanding about Jesus:  
...the love of God really lived in Jesus Christ. This love of God for the world does not withdraw from reality into noble souls detached from the world, but experiences and suffers the reality of the world at its worst. The world exhausts its rage on the body of Jesus Christ. But the martyred one forgives the world its sins. Thus reconciliation takes place. (*Ethics*)

You know, the Christian faith is the only world religion that takes as its logo a symbol of death – the cross – equivalent in its day to the electric chair today. And yet the central affirmation of Christianity is hopeful life.

You see, Jesus keeps appearing – again and again – to unlock the barriers:

    between faith and doubt,  
    between life and death,  
    between past and future,  
    between fear and joy.

Jesus keeps appearing, a dependable reminder of our dependable God. Wherever it seems as if death has demolished life, Jesus appears, and fresh hope abounds.

The resurrection doesn't allow us to sit with wounds festering, hearts broken, lives despairing. The resurrection pulls us forward out of the muck and into the light and new life that God wants for us.

I remember an Oprah episode in which the topic she was addressing was dealing with shame. She had the requisite expert psychologist/author there and many in the audience who shared stories from their lives – dreadful situations, which had understandably remained with them over the years.

They were nearing the end of the show and Oprah was giving the summary steps for overcoming shame. Something like:

    acknowledging the thing,  
    naming it, confessing it,  
    letting yourself feel the feelings  
    seek healing  
    and then I heard her say – get over it!

She and the psychologist went on to encourage these people to allow themselves to move beyond the shame – to not remain in healing mode forever. And that to "get over it" doesn't in any way diminish the depth or reality of what has gone before.

Just like the resurrection. The resurrection life is life beyond the wounds – but not without the scars. To be human is to have scar tissue, both inside and out. And with every scar there is a story.

The Christian faith does not deny the pain, the reality of the wound, the existence of the scars. Our faith enables us to go on, in the name of Christ, even with our wounds, even with our scars.

By raising Jesus from the dead, God promises each of us that we will be raised also.

I'll close with a resurrection story a friend told me – a true story about a family he knew.

    They lived in Boothbay Harbor, Maine. Mr. Durfee worked as a sternman on a lobster boat, but he never owned his own boat. All around their home was the detritus of a lifetime of collecting stuff, typical of the poor in backcountry Maine.

    My friend had known their daughter Lorna before she got married and left town. The Durfee's also had a son George who had muscular dystrophy. George had been confined to a wheelchair for as long as anyone could remember.

    All through school his devoted mother had fought for the school to build access ramps for him. She had that single-minded purpose of so many mothers of special children. The Jerry Lewis Telethon helped them buy George new wheelchairs and once built him a downstairs bedroom to improve the quality of his life.

    The day George graduated from the Boothbay Harbor High School, my friend, who was the local Congregational minister, offered a prayer for the kids. When George was wheeled across the stage, the whole auditorium rose as one person to cheer for him.

George didn't go to college, and for four or five more years he lived at home with his parents. My friend would often jog by their house, and he and George would wave at each other.

One winter George got sick with a disease any of us would have thrown off easily. But for George it was serious. Much of that winter he was in bed or in the hospital. Then it turned to pneumonia, and he died just about this time of year as winter was turning to early spring.

The family members were not church folk but because my friend had helped the sister Lorna a few years earlier, the funeral director called him and asked if he'd do the service for George. So he went down the road to see the Durfees to talk with them about their son and to plan the funeral.

That was when Mrs. Durfee told this story. Evidently, George had had a dream that winter about a month before he died. He woke up one morning and said matter-of-factly, "Mother, last night I dreamed that this spring I got up out of my wheelchair. I got up and ran all the way to Portland and back. Mother, it was wonderful, with the wind in my face. I could feel my legs working and it felt good. Mother, if I ever get out of this chair, I'm not getting back in it."

The memory of that dream kept coming back to Mrs. Durfee just before and after he died. It seemed to her more than just a coincidence, and she began to think of his dying as the imagery of that dream. For George death would be like getting up out of that chair and running freely, unfettered, without the care and confinements of a body that did not quite work right.

That's what the resurrection looks like. That's what the resurrection does. That's what being healed without being cured means. A living hope animated by a grace-filled future.

Because a hope rooted in Jesus' resurrection gives us endurance to meet the challenges before us. The Good news of the gospel is clear. When we least expect him, and when we most need him, Jesus appears.

We've all got our scars, some visible, some invisible. But the One who has called you here this day, your Savior, the Risen Christ, also has scars to prove his love for you.

And he graciously shows them to you,  
*that you might believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God,*  
*and that through believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:31)*

Amen.