

# May We Grow Back, Not to What Was, But to What We Can Become

Sunday, April 11, 2021 | The Second Sunday After Easter | [John 20:19-31](#)  
Knox-Metropolitan United Church | Regina, SK | Treaty 4 Territory Cameron Fraser

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I want to name from the outset, that this reflection names bodily wounding, personal pain, believing and disbelieving the words of those who have been hurt, harmed, and wounded.

I hope that these things are named with sensitivity and respect, but I want to acknowledge that this can be upsetting to listen and attend to.

And can take us into our own pain, which perhaps is not what we need this morning.

Please feel welcome to tune out as is best for you.

The story of Thomas

Provides one of the most visceral images of the Gospels in the Christian Scripture

Touching the wounds of his friend

Where nails were driven through his hands

Where a spear pierced his side

It's an episode that of course spawned the term "doubting Thomas"

To which Thomas is like seriously folks? I did all that other stuff and you're going focus on that?

It's inspired so many pieces of art

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Incredulity\\_of\\_Saint\\_Thomas\\_\(Caravaggio\)#/media/File:Caravaggio - The Incredulity of Saint Thomas.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Incredulity_of_Saint_Thomas_(Caravaggio)#/media/File:Caravaggio_-_The_Incredulity_of_Saint_Thomas.jpg)

In Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of St. Thomas*, Thomas, surrounded by a number of witnesses, leans in with a stern, perhaps skeptical face while Jesus pulls back his robe to expose his torso.

Thomas' finger is right inside the opening of Jesus' flesh and actually there is a hand on Thomas' wrist, likely Jesus' other hand.

One perhaps could read this as Jesus guiding Thomas' hand.

Or perhaps one might read this as Jesus limiting how deep Thomas' probing will go.

This painting offers a complicated perspective on the power in this narrative.

These are Jesus' wounds, not Thomas' – so who's story is it?

Is it about Jesus' vulnerability in sharing, or Thomas' longing for belief, or perhaps we might say his demand for proof?

The text doesn't necessarily guide us here, and we as a community of readers have some decisions to make about how we might read this.

<https://jackbaumgartner.files.wordpress.com/2007/10/saint-thomas-tres.jpg>

Contemporary American Artist Jack Baumgartner's piece *Go On St. Thomas* offers what reads to me as a potentially contrasting perspective to Caravaggio.

First of all, both Jesus and Thomas are not depicted as white-skinned Europeans, but people of colour.

Jesus has pulled back a voluminous robe that envelopes Thomas and obscures Thomas' face completely.

There are no witnesses, just the two of them.

Interestingly, the whole scene has a greater degree of privacy in that there is a red curtain which a hand is pulling back exposing (or inviting) the viewer of the painter into the scene.

An added layer as I continued to look into this piece of art, is that there also exists a version by this artist in which this private interaction is placed, like Caravaggio's, within a company of witnesses, including someone providing a soundtrack on a lute.

<https://theschoolofthetransferofenergy.com/tag/saint-thomas/#jp-carousel-6323>

Personally, I felt drawn to the first one in a way that the second lacks.

Incidentally *visio divina* divine seeing is a meditative practice that involves spending time with a piece of sacred art (and sacred can be understood broadly) as an invitation into contemplation.

There's a lot of complexity in the Thomas/Jesus interaction.

Many explorations of this focus on theological ponderings about what the church might say about the resurrected Jesus and corporality – as in of the body.

Perhaps there are those listening for whom that is an interesting question.

Depending on the theological worldview in which this question is embedded there are different potentials.

Is this a proof-text for the truth claims of a religion seeking superiority?

Is it seeking to confirm a victorious, dominating posture?

Is it seeking to provide certainty in the midst of doubt? (Certainly, that is often the lesson)

In a more expansive and generous theology (which I will own are value laden descriptors), perhaps this offers reflective possibility rather than declarative.

Setting aside theoretical questions of doctrine or future, in what ways does an affirmation of corporeal resurrection invite a faith to speak of bodies in the here and now?

This is an episode that has been of keen interest in pondering theologies of disability.

Here the focus is not in and of itself on corporeal resurrection, but that the risen Jesus in this story bears wounds.

The marks of Good Friday's violence and pain are not erased.

A risen one need not be unmarked.

Which has powerful possibility for how we view different bodies.

I have linked in the sermon text a powerful article from Sojourner's magazine, written by disabled theologian Amy Kenny.

*Jesus retains his disabling scars after resurrection as a mark of his victory over death. Why can't the church view disabled bodies with the same wholeness and strength? It is time for the church to start treating people with disabilities as full members of the body of Christ who have much more to offer than a miraculous cure narrative.*

<https://sojo.net/articles/can-church-view-disabled-bodies-jesus-body>

<https://sojo.net/articles/covid-exposed-christian-ableism-what-happens-when-churches-reopen>

We can look at this moment in the story

Jesus holding out wounded hands

Exposing wounded side

From a number of angles

Not necessarily with the intent to pull from this moment

The one theological truth contained therein,

But instead to open up points of dialogue.

To ask ourselves,

Individually and collective important questions.

Like those already named

This is why I sometimes prefer to call this speaking portion reflection

Rather than sermon

Not that I am opposed to that term in and of itself

But often, like today, a text can give space to articulate questions

That will not be answered over the course of 5 pages

And recognizing that incarnation means that word becomes flesh in our lives and community,

That we will seek to work these thing,

Into the fabric of ourselves.

So, Jesus holds out wounded hands

Does our practice of faith and community invite us to recognize and work with our individual pain, hurts and woundedness?

Recognizing a very human impulse to repress, distract, and deflect.

Recognizing how often we might be rather inclined to project our own pain onto the behaviour of others?

At the same time,

Can we be courageous about listening to one another who are in pain,

who have indeed been harmed?

How can communities, churches, societies,

come to recognize that there is something sacred in the bearing witness?

And what about Thomas?

Is this a model of being willing to unabashedly bear witness to the fullness of the pain of another?

Or is there an exploitative element here?

How often do people feel entitled to a re-airing of someone's pain in order to accept it as valid?

How many people who have been harmed have come to feel, through this, that others are entitled to their testimony?

<https://enfleshed.com/pages/you-dont-owe-anyone-access-to-your-trauma-on-jesus-thomas-and-wounds>

On the KM social media this weekend we shared a reflection on the Thomas/Jesus story from *enfleshed: spiritual nourishment for collective liberation*.

*Thomas needed to feel his way into belief. He depended on the vulnerability of Jesus to help him get back in touch with his own [vulnerability] after so much violence was done. But when this story ends, though transformation did occur, we do not see Jesus begin a tour of such encounters.*

*You do not owe anyone access to your trauma because you hope for their solidarity. Even Jesus was choosy about with whom he shared the details of his body's memories.*

The reflection ends like this...

*But remember that you and your people and movements for Life have nothing to prove to be deserving of love, deserving of freedom, deserving of comrades and allies. So let your story be an invitation into collective liberation, not a plea for the crumbs of others' conviction. You can tell the truth in ways that aliven you. You can be honest without being objectified.*

As an Affirming Ministry we have committed ourselves as a community of faith to engage in matters of justice that show up in our world in particular embodied ways,

Often bearing trauma and woundedness.

Maybe this sermon or reflection feels like it has not come to a resolve about the whole Thomas/Jesus moment, perhaps in a way that might be unsatisfying, feeling like it's only become more complex, like there's a whole bunch of threads to hold in tension.

That wasn't really what I intended when I began working on this,

But I think that's where it needs to be.

As we think of this phrase

*May We Grow Back, Not to What Was, But to What We Can Become*

In the context of who we are becoming

I mean this in relation to Knox-Met United Church of course,

But also our own lives

Communities

And I mean this not only in relation to emerging from life in pandemic, but also all the things with which this time has challenged us to reckon

Ecologically

Economically

Socially

Personally

Grief

Fear

Loneliness

I think that there is something in this Thomas/Jesus dynamic that might offer us wisdom.

A challenge to recognize how ableism is woven into Christian theology and spirituality.

An invitation to be attentive to our own pain and an openness to be curious about how much it might sometimes drive our responses and reactions.

A challenge to build communities of vulnerability in which shame and hurt can be shared and people can feel held in that.

A warning against objectifying and instrumentalizing hurt.

I wonder whether there has been a thread in this reflection, that inspires you to open conversation?

I'd love to hear about it.

As we seek to grow back

Not to what was

But to What we might become

May we find courage – as in a fullness of heart – community and compassion.

We are not alone.

We are called, to bless the space between us.

Thanks be to God.