

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian Church on April 4, 2021.

SUFFERING REDEEMED

Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; reach out your hand and put it in my side; do not doubt but believe." John 20:27

Many of us have heard this passage from John's gospel so many times that we fail to notice what I think is one of the great mysteries of the resurrection. In our long reading from John's Gospel the risen Jesus appears before the disciples and shows them his hands and his side.

My question has always been – if God has raised Jesus from death and, as Paul said, given a spiritual body – why do the wounds remain? Does not the resurrection bring about a complete transformation that would heal all scars? Yet the wounds given by the Roman Soldiers remain.

This Easter morning, we conclude our Lenten exploration of the meaning suffering. In the resurrection of Jesus, suffering is redeemed. God's love transforms the negative experiences into life giving grace.

This past Thursday was opening day for major league baseball. Each year when the baseball season begins, I am reminded of how much I miss the voice of Phil Rizzuto. Phil was a shortstop for the Yankees before I was born and then became a Yankee announcer. During my childhood I listened to Phil's voice more than any other human being. He talked to me on television and radio for about three hours during 162 games a year. During these countless hours, Phil shared his understanding of life.

There are some critics who wondered what in the world had Phil, for whom elementary rules of English grammar and syntax were alien, been saying.

It turns out he was saying poetry. That is at least what two geniuses, Hart Seely and Tom Peyer, discovered when they took some tapes of Rizzuto's broadcasts and transcribed them as free verse. They published a book called ***O Holy Cow! The Selected Verses of Phil Rizzuto***. The book is filled with hokey, humorous and sometimes simple profound words.

Almost forty-two years ago, Thurman Munson, the heart of the great Yankee teams of the 70's was killed in a plane crash. Rizzuto tried to comfort the fans during the next pregame show with these ad-libbed remarks:

**There's a little prayer I always say.
It's just a little one. You can say it no matter what,
Whether you're Catholic or Jewish or Protestant or whatever.
And I've probably said it a thousand times**

Since I heard the news on Thurman Munson.

**I'm not trying to be maudlin or anything.
His Eminence, Cardinal Cooke, is going to come out
And say a little prayer for Thurman Munson.
But this is just a little one I say time and time again,
It's just: Angel of God, Thurman's guardian dear,
To whom his love commits him here there or everywhere,
Ever this night and day be at his side.
To light and guard, to rule and guide.**

**For some reason it makes me feel like I'm talking to Thurman
Or whoever's name you put in there,
Whether it be my wife or any of my children, my parents or
anything.
It's just something to keep you really from going bananas.
Because if you let this,
If you keep thinking about what happened, and
you can't understand it.
That's what really drives you to despair.**

**Faith. You gotta have faith.
You know, they say time heals all wounds,
And I don't agree with that a hundred percent.
It gets you to cope with wounds.
You carry them the rest of your life.**

I believe that Phil Rizzuto reminds us of a great truth found in our Gospel lesson for this morning. He tells us that our faith helps us to cope with our wounds, but "You carry them the rest of your life."

I would like to focus on what our reading from John teaches us about the wounds we carry.

We are first reminded that our wounds are real. Jesus came to Thomas and showed him his hands and sides. Jesus experienced real pain when nails were hammered through his wrists and ankles and when a spear was thrust through his side.

In like manner we suffer real wounds in our lives. The physical and emotional injuries we suffer are not something we are just to ignore. We endure many losses in our lives. During our span on this earth we experience a variety of wounds.

For many it is losses due to death. The loss of a spouse, children, parents and friends are not to be grimly borne with a stiff upper lip as if they did not happen. They are wounds which cause real deep pain.

A trauma in childhood can scar us for life.

The break up of relationships through divorce, disagreements or betrayal inflict real pain on all involved.

The loss of a job through attrition or firing causes a true puncture to our self-worth.

A failure in school or the loss of a promotion harms our self image.

Life in its own way dishes out wound after wound to us.

These wounds are real.

A second truth is that our faith does not make our wounds disappear.

In our reading from John, Jesus reveals his wounds to Thomas. Remember that this occurred after the resurrection of Jesus. The power of God had been at work to raise Jesus from the dead. Yet the wounds inflicted by the Roman Soldiers are still present.

So it remains in our lives as well. Our faith in Christ does not remove all the hurt that we experience. Time does lessen the intensity of the pain we experience. The passing of the days helps us get past the first shock. We do begin to get over the numbness that often settles in when we have been hurt. But the wound never completely heals.

I first learned this in my first year in ministry when visiting with a woman who was in her eighties. In talking about her childhood, she told of her mother's death during the 1918 flu epidemic that hit Buffalo around World War I. She was only twelve years old at the time. More than seventy years later the wound of that loss still affected her life. Her life had been shaped in part by that loss.

The wounds that we experience help to shape who we are. They remain with us, in some degree, the rest of our lives. Each one of us can remember some event, or some harsh words spoken to us that still have an effect on us today.

Faith in Jesus does not remove all our wounds.

The presence of Jesus does transform our wounds. We have focused during Lent on the words of Simone Weil:

The extreme greatness of Christianity lies in the fact that it does not seek a supernatural remedy for suffering, but a supernatural use for it.

She means, at least in part, that while God does not remove our wounds he transforms them. The wounds are used for a greater good.

We are told that when an oyster has a small grain of sand get into its opening it causes irritation. The oyster responds to this by coating it with some fluids and a pearl is developed.

The wounds in our lives can be used by God to produce pearls. Listen to these words of Harriet Beecher Stowe:

I have been the mother of seven children, the most beautiful and most loved of whom lies buried near my Cincinnati residence. It was at his dying bed and at his grave that I learned what a poor slave mother may feel when her child is torn away from her. In these depths of sorrow, which seemed immeasurable, it was my own prayer to God that such anguish might not be suffered in vain. There were circumstances about his death of such peculiar bitterness, what seemed almost cruel suffering, that I felt that I could never be consoled for it unless this crushing of my own heart might enable to work out some great good to others. I allude to this here, for I have often felt that much that is in that book, UNCLE TOM'S CABIN, had its root in the bitter sorrows of that summer.

So God can use the wounds of our lives to mold, shape and work through us.

This should not surprise us. For are not the wounds and suffering of Jesus at the heart of our faith. The innocent Jesus was condemned by the authorities of his day. He was abandoned by those he called his friends. He was cruelly beaten by the Roman soldiers and had a crown of thorns placed on his head. Jesus was forced to march outside the city and there, nails were driven through his body to attach him to a wooden cross. There for several hours he suffered and then, after dealing with the pain from lack of blood, exposure and difficulty breathing, he died.

These wounds would seem to be pointless and yet God used Jesus' suffering to bring forgiveness and the hope of eternal life to all humankind. It was by his suffering that you and I have been saved. These wounds that were so brutally given become in the resurrection a symbol of love. As the writer of our next hymn tells us: **Crown Him the Lord of love: Behold his hands and side, Rich wounds, yet visible above in beauty glorified: No angel in the sky Can fully bear that sight, But downward bends his burning eye, At mysteries so bright.**

On this Easter Sunday, you and I can trust in God to use our suffering for his glory. As Christ's suffering brought hope to the world, so God can use our hurts for a redemptive purpose.

Jesus not only helps us to cope with our wounds,
but transforms them into instruments of his love.

May we give our suffering to Christ that we may be raised with him.