

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd  
Easter 2  
April 28, 2019

## Seeing the Wounds John 20:19-31

What was it that gave him away? Was it seeing, touching, feeling the wounds that made you believe? Is that how you recognized the fullness of his humanity — by seeing the wounds?

As Christians, we are urged to connect the needs of the world to the resources of the church. There are so many ways that we can live out this call to be in ministry to all the world. Some choose to serve the homeless. Others offer food to the hungry or tutor children after school. Some visit elderly people in assisted living facilities or at home. Others want to be a companion to adults with disabilities. There are an infinite number of ways to serve our community and offer the grace and love of Christ to those around us. In turn, we are given a glimpse of the risen Christ in the people we serve.

In today's gospel reading, Thomas needed to see Jesus' wounds to know that Jesus was really risen. He just couldn't believe that Jesus could be alive unless he saw him with his own eyes. And not only saw him, but touched him and heard Jesus speak his name. He needed to see, hear and touch Jesus' humanity to know and believe it was real.

Recently, an agency serving the homeless solicited donations of school supplies for children. Often, we assume that children only need supplies at the start of school, but school supplies need constant refreshing. In addition to the supplies, there was a request for donations for school uniforms. Inevitably, someone will ask how it is that families who are homeless can afford to send their kids to private schools. Most families do not send their kids to private schools. Rather, some urban school districts require kids to wear uniforms, and in most cases, those can only be purchased at certain stores that carry polos with the approved emblem.

Some families, however, *do* send their kids to private schools. Every parent makes the best choices they can for their child — even parents experiencing homelessness. But, really, why must we explain that? Is the trauma of homelessness not enough reason to help another human being? Do we need to see the wound to know the need is real? Sometimes people ask to see the wound before they will believe that the people we serve are persons worthy and deserving of grace and kindness during their most vulnerable hour.

I want to tell you some stories this morning. There was a young woman who entered a homeless shelter with her two young children. Her youngest would just be starting kindergarten. This was neither her first experience with parenting young children nor her first experience with homelessness. She had experienced homelessness before with her siblings.

Later, when she was just a youth herself, she scored very high on the PSAT. So high, in fact, that she was offered free tuition and room and board at a prestigious high school — a boarding school for girls. This kind of opportunity would not otherwise have been economically possible for her hard-working mother, who was a nurse. She chose to attend.

Unfortunately, she couldn't finish her high school education at this prestigious school because her mother died unexpectedly. Her siblings were being cared for by her father; at least, that's what she assumed until Child Protective Services was called because they had not been attending school. She discovered that her father had been drinking to excess and her siblings needed help. She left school and came home to parent them. They had their ups and downs. She hustled between jobs and juggled school and work, but ultimately, they all came through it. Her siblings are grown now, leading their own lives.

She was never able to go to college. She is so smart, so capable, but her circumstances were not within her control. She sacrificed her own opportunities to be the very best daughter, sister and mother she could be.

When people learn that she needs money to purchase school uniforms for her children to attend school, I wonder: Must you see the wounds, feel them, touch them and hear the quiver in her voice when she tells her story to know that she is a human being who just needs some help right now?

Is it not enough to know that she is a child of God, that God loves her and her kids? Must we know the pain of another person's life to justify our help? Blessed are those who have not seen, but have come to believe.

There is another story I would like you to hear. Leonard is a tall, dark-skinned man with a deep, gentle voice. He is the type of person you know is kind and is overflowing with love from the moment you meet him. Leonard attends a church near his home in a senior citizen complex. Leonard also volunteers at a homeless shelter. He is the overnight guardian at the shelter.

When I asked him why he does this, he simply replied that he wants to make sure there is always a safe place for people experiencing homelessness, especially women and children.

Leonard is 76 years old. He spent 40 years of his life homeless. He understands homelessness better than most people. If you get to know Leonard, one of the things he will tell you is that most of his homelessness was a choice. He chose to live on the streets. He says that the way to really be free is not to own anything at all; not to owe anyone money, not even a landlord or a utility company. He says that when you are homeless, you are invisible. No one wants to see you or engage with you, and that frees you up to move around and meet people who really need community.

I can think of examples in the gospels of a man who advised selling all your possessions to engage with the people who really need community.

One night on a park bench, Leonard sat by himself, rolling a cigarette close to his body so it would be covered by the hood of his sweatshirt in the falling snow. Two young men approached him, pulled a gun and told him to give them his money. Leonard didn't have any money, and he asked the duo if whatever they had hoped to buy would be worth his life. That gave them pause enough to give Leonard time to offer his park bench to them to sit and share his cigarette. They sat down.

Since he now had some time to get to know these young guys, Leonard asked what could make them so desperate for cash that they would want to pull a gun on an elderly man in the park. One of the young men told him that his girlfriend had just had a baby and they didn't have any money for formula or diapers and he just needed the cash to buy some food for the baby. Leonard told him he sure wouldn't be helping his girlfriend or the baby if he got picked up for armed robbery tonight.

While they finished the cigarette together, Leonard reached into his bag and pulled out the forms for SNAP benefits, better known as food stamps. Leonard had once worked in the welfare office. He kept copies of the aid forms in his bag, just in case he might meet someone who needed them.

Since he was an aid worker, he knew how to fill out the forms, which made him especially useful as many of the people he met in the homeless community could not read or write. He sat with the young man and filled out the forms and told him where to take them in the morning. He explained how the program worked and told him how to get what he needed for the baby in the meantime.

Leonard always sees the person first and never asks if the wound is deep enough to be worthy of help. Leonard's first response is always to address the humanity of the people he meets. He never assumed the young men were "bad," or inherently dangerous. He carries around SNAP benefit forms, not on the condition that he meet qualified individuals, but with the assumption that anyone without food is qualified based on their humanity. He didn't need to know more about this young guy than that he must be desperate if he would be willing to commit murder for a few dollars.

Blessed are those who have not seen, but have come to believe.

Thomas doubted Jesus' humanity. He doubted that Jesus was alive, that Jesus was risen from the dead. Thomas needed to see the wounds to know that it was true that the impossible had happened — that Jesus had risen from the dead.

Today, when you leave this place of worship and go into your places of ministry, I hope you will believe in the humanity of the people you meet, that they are beloved children of God deserving of every good thing for no other reason than that God loves them. I hope that you will look into their faces and see the face of God. I hope you will see the Risen One, alive and well, in those who just need a little help to get through today. I hope you can believe without first having to see the wounds to prove it.