

John 20:19-31 “Signs of Life”
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First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama
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When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord.’ But he said to them, ‘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 his side, I will not believe.’

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, 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. Do not doubt but believe.’ Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’ Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

One summer day a couple of years ago, Sam and I were hiking in Point Beach Forest, Wisconsin, near the shores of Lake Michigan. It was more of a frantic run than a hike, because we were being attacked by swarms of mosquitos, but something made me stop. There, near an indentation in the landscape, was a sign pointing out the difference in the variety and growth patterns of the trees in that particular part of the forest. This, the sign told us, was part of the lingering effects of the Peshtigo Fire.

You may not have heard of the Peshtigo Fire. I hadn't, until we moved to Wisconsin. The Peshtigo Fire burned over a million acres and killed over 2,000 people. One source notes that, "prolonged drought and high temperatures...led to fire-prone conditions. Additionally, the introduction of extensive farming, logging and industrial practices in the area made for large clearings and increased the likelihood of sparks. Whatever the cause, much of Wisconsin and Upper Michigan were engulfed in firestorms ...at one point the roaring blaze reportedly jumped several miles over the waters of Green Bay."¹

It still stands as the deadliest wildfire in U.S. history, but it happened on October 8, 1871, the same night as the Chicago Fire, and the Chicago Fire got all the press. The Peshtigo Fire has been called "The Forgotten Fire," except, 146 years later, the earth hasn't forgotten. The forest is still bearing the scars--evidence of that deadly inferno.

We all need evidence to believe something. We need to hear, touch, see, taste for ourselves, to know that something is real. Thomas was no different than us, and no different than the rest of the disciples.

Remember, by the time Thomas got to see Jesus in that secret room, the others had already seen him. Jesus had come to them through a locked door, and showed them his scars—his hands with the marks of the nails, his side with the gash from the spear. They could see that he was no ghost and he was no imposter. His scars gave evidence to the tragic story of crucifixion that they had all witnessed. And his living, breathing presence gave evidence to the other story, which, until then, they had doubted—the story of his resurrection.

Unfortunately, Thomas wasn't there at the time that Jesus showed up. So when he got back and heard it from the others, he said, "Unless I see the scar of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the scar of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

¹ Everett Rosenfeld, "The Peshtigo Fire, 1871," posted June 8, 2011 on <http://content.time.com>. Accessed April 18, 2019.

Thomas was only asking for the same opportunity that the others had been given--to discern for themselves whether Jesus was really alive. And that's what Jesus offered him, when he showed back up. "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." That was enough for Thomas. "My Lord and my God!" he cried.

For some reason, I've always thought Thomas asked to see and put his hands in Jesus' *wounds*—that's the word that's always been in my head when I think of this story. The image of him wanting to actually touch *wounds* was kind of gory to me, that would have been a different word in Greek, and I was reminded in reading the passage this time that that isn't the word that Thomas uses. In the Greek, he doesn't ask to see the wounds, he asks to see the "τύπον." In English, those are the "marks" or "scars."

There's a difference--a big difference between a wound and a scar. A wound is still open, unchanged from the time it was inflicted. You can have wounds on a corpse, as anyone who has ever watched "CSI" is aware. But a scar is a wound that has healed—and only a living being can heal.

What Sam and I saw in that Wisconsin forest was evidence of a very real trauma—the Peshtigo Fire; but it wasn't an open wound: it was a scar. New growth covering the old injury--new growth bearing witness to the devastating destruction of the fire, *and* to the fact that the forest is still alive. Still healing.

As we observe Earth Sunday, we do so at a time when the entire earth is engulfed in the enormous trauma of climate change. As with the Peshtigo Fire, humans, too, are getting caught in the destruction--in tornadoes and hurricanes and flooding and drought and famine and wildfires. The ocean is choking on plastic. Entire cities are unable to drink the water that comes out of their taps. Whole populations are being driven out of their homes, knocking desperately at the doors of nations where the effects are still less severe.

It's easy to despair. Last week, Sam and I were visiting my parents in Nevada when our church newsletter came out. My mother was reading my article in the newsletter—because she's a good mother—where I talk about Earth Day and say that, because we're Easter people, we don't despair. She looked up from reading

and asked, “Don’t you ever despair?” And I had to answer, “Are you kidding?! Every day!”

It’s easy to despair! Easy to give up and hide in a room, like the disciples in their post-crucifixion bunker, thinking that the world has ended and all hope is lost. But while there’s life, there’s hope. That’s Cicero, not the Bible, but it’s still true. While there’s life, there’s hope, and the world is alive. It’s scarred, for sure; and it’s being newly-wounded every day by our actions. But, like Jesus, it is alive. And it was created with the power to heal, given half a chance. That’s our calling: to give the world that chance. To partner with it in its healing—a healing that can bring new life to all of creation.

Think of what happened for the disciples, when the Lord they’d thought was dead, showed up, scarred but alive: they stopped hiding and they stopped despairing. Instead, they got to work. The whole next book of the Bible is called “The *Acts* of the Apostles.” It’s filled with a flurry of determined activity—proclaiming the Good News, confronting the systems of destruction, organizing to make sure that the most vulnerable were cared for, journeying throughout the known world to invite others into their mission of salvation.

That’s what happened, once they had proof of life.

Well, the signs of life in this world are all around us. And the Lord we know to be risen, came because *he so loves this world*. Came to save *this world*. Came that this world, too, might have life in his name. And he’s holding out his scarred hands to us, beckoning us to join him.

If that’s not a call to action, I don’t know what is.