

Scars, doubt and breathing peace

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When a friend got a major scar, the doctors asked her what kind of plastic surgery she wanted. She laughed at the question, responding, “Are you serious? Do you really think I’m going to give up these bragging rights? I earned this scar!”

I loved hearing her tell the story. Her impertinence always seemed even more charming, since she was one of those rare women who radiated effortless beauty.

I often talked about my friend when my daughter would fall. I’d pick up her tiny body and clean out the scrape. When the pain subsided, I’d soothe her with the promise, “That is going to be a fantastic scar. You’ll remember this day for the rest of your life.”

My own body is full of scars. The interruptions veining my skin represent minor accidents marking my clumsiness—splitting my chin on an end table, stabbing my thigh with a pair of sewing scissors, cutting myself on a river barnacle, or electrocuting my finger with a car battery. The marks conjure up summer days, interrupted projects, and mechanical mishaps.

I like to imagine Jesus, on that day of fear and doubt, coming in and showing his side to his buddies: “Check out my scar!” After all, he earned it.

I also think of two siblings, who were often abused by their father. In the aftermath of the attacks, they would stand on the bathroom counter and look into the long mirror, comparing their scars. It became a ritual for them. Through those marks, they shared the secret of their father’s fury as they learned to become survivors together.

When I think of those children—and so many like them—I wonder where God was. Where was God when the belt whipped so hard that it broke the skin on their tiny legs? Where was God in the violence? It makes me angry to think of the powerlessness of God.

I tremble to put “powerless” and “God” in one sentence, but I suppose I would rather think of God as powerless than cruel, and those feel like my only options. It’s clear to me why Thomas doubted. How could one believe after witnessing such brutality? How could one believe when God’s back had been turned to sight of such rending?

Yet, it seems his faith restored when he saw the scars. Somehow, therein lies the power and mystery of Christianity. Because we know that God did not turn God’s back on the cruelty. God bore it. The scars prove it. And the presence of God’s Spirit still blows with peace, standing beside us as we caress our own ruptured skin and trace the roadmap of tragedies that we bear.

There is much to that disfigured flesh that teaches us how to be survivors together. Somehow, even the markings our torn incarnation witness to the divine with their thin, sorrowful beauty.