

The Christ with scars: John 20:19-31

by [James A. Harnish](#) in the [April 6, 2010](#) issue

Thomas used to shock me. I agreed with John Calvin that “the stupidity of Thomas was astonishing and monstrous . . . he was not only obstinate, but also proud and contemptuous in his treatment of Christ.” To be called a Doubting Thomas would have been a soul-shaking insult to my faith.

All atheists, agnostics and garden-variety doubters used to shock me. I had a visceral, self-righteous reaction to books like *The God Delusion*. I thought I needed to provide a leakproof defense for the faith or serve up spiritual bromides to calm the discomfort in my own mind, even if they failed to resolve the questions in someone else’s mind.

But doubt doesn’t shock me anymore. Even Calvin acknowledged that the story of Thomas is in John’s Gospel to show that doubt is common to all of us. Honest doubt is not a contradiction of faith but an essential quality in a healthy, growing relationship with God. I’ve discovered what Rabbi Daniel F. Polish called “the valuable service disbelief can render” (*Context*, July 2009).

What continues to surprise me is not Thomas’s doubt but the evidence for belief that the risen Christ offers. I’m stunned by the way Jesus “showed them his hands and his side.” I’m shaken by his invitation to touch the wounds. I am shocked by his scars. I can deal with doubt, but these ugly marks of human suffering on the body of the risen Christ blow me away.

There are times when I wish I had a different story, times when I would prefer a resurrection in which the power of God massaged away those ghastly reminders of human suffering and pain. I know why Gnosticism is such a persistent heresy; there are times when I would prefer a Christ whose divinity overrules his humanity—a spiritual being who is not wounded the way I am.

As a child of the 1950s I’ve had moments when I wished that the risen Christ were a divine Superman, “faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound.” I’ve imagined Jesus to be “a strange visitor from a distant planet with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men” who, “disguised as Clark Kent . . . fights the never-ending battle for truth, justice and the American way.” I’ve also imagined Christ, in a more generationally appropriate image, to be the divine avatar who enters another world to save its inhabitants from destruction.

That may be the Christ I want, but the Christ I get in the Gospel is recognized by his scars.

A few months ago I stood beside the hospital bed of a 31-year-old father as he cradled his infant son in his arms. Life was seeping out of this man’s cancer-racked body. I would have liked to promise a Christ who would wipe away the brutal signs of human suffering and death. But all I could offer was the Christ with scars.

Together we descended into the valley of the shadow of death, and as we did we claimed the promise of the God who in Christ descended into the hell of suffering through which we were walking. We faced the darkness with the assurance that “we have no superhuman High Priest to whom our weaknesses are unintelligible—he himself has shared fully in all our experience” (Heb. 4:15, in the J. B. Phillips translation). It was all I had to offer—and it was enough.

Those shocking scars were enough for the disciples on that first Easter evening. They were enough to help Thomas overcome his doubt and to awaken his faith. But are they enough for those “who have not seen and yet have come to believe”?

Stunned by Jesus’ scars, I am also intrigued by the possibility that the nail-scarred Christ meets us when we touch the scars of the wounded places in our own lives. In *Subversive Spirituality*, Eugene Peterson says the wound is meant to be “a listening post, a chance to exit the small confines of a self-defined world and enter the spaciousness of a God-defined world.”

I confess that literary snobbishness and theological prejudice kept me from reading *The Shack*. I am skeptical of overnight sensations and I detest pop religious novels. But I was struck when I read an interview in which author William Young called “the shack” a metaphor for a human heart that has been scarred by abuse and pain. It’s the house where we hide our wounds the way the character Mac in the novel tries to hide “the great sadness” in his life. Young calls the book a fictional narrative of his own spiritual journey. When he opened the door of his shack, he discovered the all-embracing love of the triune God who had been there all the time.

Jean Vanier, founder of L’Arche communities for people with developmental disabilities, discovered the presence of the risen Christ when he was stricken with an infection that left him as weak and dependent as the people he served. He learned that we should not hide from the wounded parts of our lives. “There we will touch a lot of pain. We will possibly touch a lot of anger. We will possibly touch a lot of loneliness and anguish. Then we will hear something deeper. We will hear the voice of Jesus say, ‘I love you. You are precious to my eyes.’”

Perhaps Christ’s invitation to Thomas to touch the scars on his body is the invitation to each of us to experience the presence of Christ by touching the scars in our own lives. There is no doubt about it—that would be shocking.