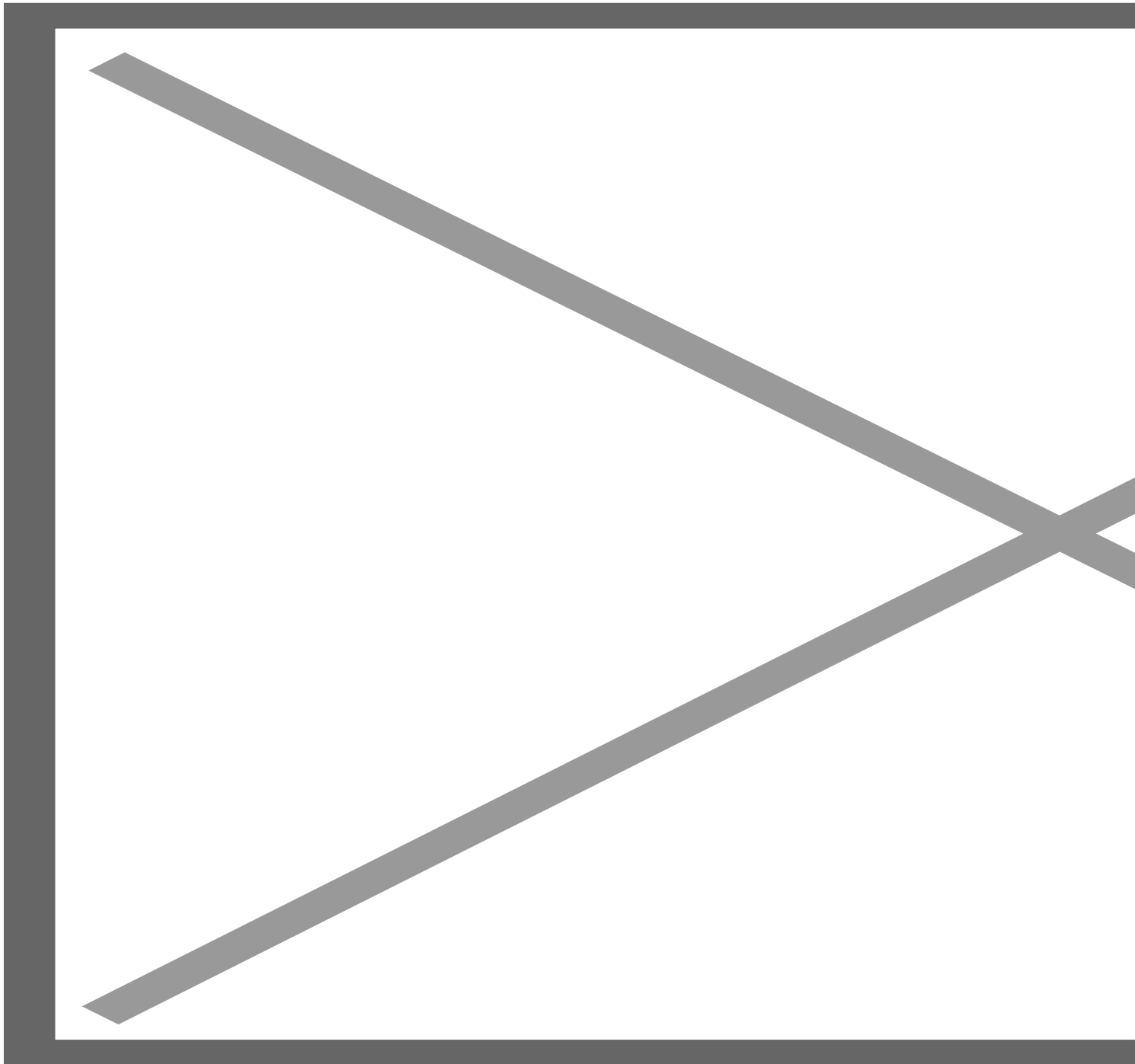


Etched in flesh

Stigmata assert identity and collective memory through self-scarred skin. What if we read the Thomas story through a tattoo hermeneutic?

by [Adam Toler](#) in the [April 2026](#) issue
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A Chin woman in Myanmar with traditional facial tattoos (intek1 / iStock Editorial / Getty)

A week before I taught my first class on comparative religion at a Jesuit middle school in New Haven, Connecticut, my 80-year-old coworker turned to me and said, “The students will not know who you are. They will not know what to think of you. But if you roll up your sleeves and they see your tattoos, they will *want* to know who you are.” My students were all local Black and Brown children living at or below the federal poverty line. Should they eventually attend college, many of them would be the first in their families to do so. By contrast, I’m a biracial, Taiwanese-White Texan in the process of getting my third graduate degree—from an institution my students know mostly for its notorious exacerbation of wealth disparity in their city. My coworker knew teaching these students would require me to speak across chasms of difference, so she advised that my first words be spoken by way of my tattoos, my ink-scarred skin.

It is not a novel proposition that trauma and tattoos are therapeutic companions, with the latter functioning (somewhat paradoxically) as a somatic balm and identity re-narrator for the pain of the former. My students did seem to recognize my tattooed arms as a bridge between their own identities and whoever I may be, and recent social trends praise tattoos along these lines. In the arena of Christian theology, however, such praise is rare, especially when tattooing is treated as a culturally contextualized self-scarring practice akin to extreme fasting or self-flagellation.

As a pastoral caregiver who is both heavily tattooed and a sufferer of self-injury, I am deeply invested in understanding how tattooing and self-scarring narratives can proclaim life—when told not only by those who “read” our skin but also by those of us whose own skin tells our histories of tragedy and triumph. Scars profess the stories and identities of oft-overlooked, oft-silenced communities and individuals, one of whom was a Middle Eastern Jew with holes in his wrists and a gash in his side.

When such proclamation emerges, as it does in a variety of contexts, we can see how self-scarring functions as a medium for creedal memory, self-disclosure, and testimony. One poignant example of such testimony is in the soon-to-be-extinct facial tattooing practices of Indigenous Chin women in Myanmar. In the stories told by these women’s tattoos, we glimpse a novel perspective on Thomas’s reaction to the risen Christ’s stigmata (John 20:24–30). We might call this perspective a tattoo hermeneutic. Not all scars are alike, but they tell the stories of their bearers in similar ways.

Her eyelid quivered as the bamboo tapped into her skin for the millionth time in eight hours, leaving behind a pinprick of color—a mixture of the shaman’s saliva, the umbrous magical pigment, and her own ruddy fluids. Modern tattoo anthropologist Lars Krutak recounts this moment in an essay for photojournalist Jens Uwe Parkitny’s 2017 book *Marked for Life*. Krutak compares this Chin tattooing procedure to “a baptism in blood,” noting that it serves functions far beyond mere ornamentation.

Tattoos are often read through Western aesthetics as an art form, reducing communication to presentation. But tattooing, especially for Indigenous communities, resists this. As Krutak explains, “tattooing is a system of knowledge transmission. . . a visual language of the skin whereby culture is inscribed, experienced, and preserved in a myriad of culturally specific ways.” The import of the face as a medium for communication is twofold: it is self-descriptive and other-directed.

Chin women bear their tattoos primarily for themselves, explains Parkitny, as “visual expression[s] of belonging and identity, of the ability to endure pain, of having mastered different stages in life, of being a full member of the community with duties, privileges and status, of a particular beauty perception and—last not least—of a certain spiritual and super-natural belief.” But according to feminist body theorist Jane Kilby, people’s tattooed bodies also function alongside their voices in such a way that “the commixture of words and images generates a triangulation of meaning—a kind of three-dimensional narrative—in the movement between words, images, and the reader’s eye,” as she writes in the edited volume *Thinking Through the Skin*. The tattooed faces of Chin

women herald their identity in ways distinct from yet parallel to their own spoken testimonies.

Relatedly, their tattoos function as a form of creedal memory, proclaiming shared values with a permanency that “reduces internal dissension” and encourages “social stability,” Krutak notes. Where Christian communities have scrawled our doctrines and creeds onto paper and into stone—which can be erased, dropped, edited, and redacted—the Chin women have theirs permanently etched into their flesh. Their skin functions as a continuously performed ritual of remembrance, even as their incipient narratives are lost to time.

The first known portrait of a Chin woman with a facial tattoo was published in 1800 by Michael Symes. When Symes asked a Chin woman about the origins of the practice, she responded that she “did not know, but said it had existed from time immemorial, and that it was invariably performed on every female, at a certain age.” Understanding Chin women’s facial tattoos as a medium for memory when words fail prompts a further question: What role might trauma play in shaping the ritual’s context?

Traumatic events present dysthymic paradoxes—experiences that cry to be told but refuse to surrender any words that make sense. For these moments, it is not uncommon to carve meaning out of misery: “If the promise of language fails and speaking cannot sustain life, another ‘voice’ must be found,” writes Kilby. “Here, then,” she goes on, “wounding one’s own skin is another way of speaking of trauma and pain.”

Facial tattooing among Chin women revolves around similar circumstances. Early observers noted that the practice was undertaken with particular care “in cases where the tribes reside in a more turbulent and disturbed portion of the country,” Krutak writes. For Chin women, the Spirit suffuses the somatic. Their “skin becomes, rather than simply is, meaningful” through the practice of facial tattooing. The creedal ritual bears testimony to their communal identity, their survival and connectivity, particularly amid moments of seeming overwhelm.

It may seem perplexing that dermal trauma and its lingering evidence in pigmented scars might function to heal the harm of traumatic circumstances. But Chin women distinguish the injuriousness of tattooing from the detrimental concept of *harm*. Krutak recounts that “upon completion of the tattoo, there was another ritual with prayers given to . . . female spirits. This invocation was uttered so that no *harm* would come to the tattoo client, since her bloody wounds could perhaps attract a lurking evil spirit.” This distinction between wounds and harm reveals a complex nuance in the cultural and communicative significance of this practice amongst Chin communities. Unfortunately, nuance rarely survives cross-cultural translation.

There have been several modern efforts to outlaw Chin facial tattooing, including the government’s official banning of the practice in the 1960s. Such responses are shaped by inaccurate historical narratives. According to Krutak, they mistranslate the “language of tattoo . . . the shared symbols, myths, rituals, and social values that are written on the body in ink” by mistaking the melancholic beauty of scarred memory for violence, erasing the stabilizing and identity-forming role these marks play within threatened communities. Parkitny refers to this false history as the “‘we-made-ourselves-ugly’ theory,” in which Chin communities were said to have “started to ‘mark’ the faces of young girls once they reached puberty . . . to deliberately destroy the beautiful appearance,” aiming to dissuade a marauding king and his soldiers from abducting and raping Chin girls and women. This unfounded, harm-centric narrative perverts the protective features of female facial tattoos, co-opts the trauma response to frame modernity’s abolition of a cultural ritual as a feminist trajectory toward bodily autonomy, and bludgeons subaltern beauty standards with colorist and racist images of the once victimized, now ugly and savage Chin.

This narrative has led to the gradual extinction of Chin facial tattooing practices as a form of both beautification and collective identification—a kind of epistemicide. The loss wrought from this mistranslation is both aesthetic and eschatological. Krutak documents that some Chin communities “believe that their ancestors cannot recognize them if they do not bear the ancient tattoo marks on their face and forehead.” So, when Parkitny

recounts meeting a Laytu Chin tattoo master whose “own daughters, teenagers and tweens at the time, had no tattoos and preferred to apply lipstick and Thanakha [a facial lightening paste] to enhance their beauty,” he reveals not only a mother who is contending with the fact that her own daughters view her as, in some way, ugly, but also a shamanic matriarch who must make peace with the reality that she might not be able to recognize her own daughters in the life to come—their identities forgotten in favor of white-faced “beauty.”

Although female facial tattooing among the Chin tribes is frequently misinterpreted and mistranslated by those outside of the community, it is a method of communication that expresses a fundamental identity assertion, grounding the Chin communities in a shared ethos and transcribing their collective memory for centuries. This is the tattoo hermeneutic, a creedal remembrance through self-scarred skin—one that is fruitful to carry into our reading of Christian scripture.

When speaking of tattoos within Christian circles, the most common points of reference are the prohibitions in Leviticus 19:28 and Deuteronomy 14:1, the self-mutilation by the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18:28, and the mark (??????) of the beast in Revelation 13:16–17. It should be no surprise, then, how stigmatized these marks are, given that *stigma* is literally the Latin word for tattoo and derives from similar origins as the Greek word for mark in Revelation 13 (??????; phonetically, *charagma*). I would argue that the common stigma toward tattoos and self-inflicted scars stemming from such citations of “marks” and “cuttings” in scripture is not a mistranslation but rather a misapplication of the text. As with the Chin women, these marks are, in fact, statements of identity—specifically of fidelity to a supernatural entity seen as culturally and spiritually separate from the Christian deity. This reading is historically corroborated by Christian missionaries’ attempts to eradicate facial tattooing practices that carry any alternative spiritual meaning.

It is accurate to interpret Chin women’s tattoos as creedal claims with a spiritual resonance that seemingly threatens the universalizing norms of Christian doctrine. However, it is not appropriate to apply this identity-centered reading simultaneously with all the same connotations of self-harm that accompany the aforementioned self-scarring instances in scripture. The harm-filled cultural contexts of Hebraic disobedience to YHWH, ritualistic exsanguination by desperate Baal worshipers, and socioeconomic enslavement via branding to an apocalyptic evil that resembles the Roman empire are simply not the cultural contexts within which Chin women tattoo their faces. According to Indian Catholic theologian George Soares-Prabhu, a culturally specific reading of scripture requires mapping the concerns of a specific community onto a biblical text that feasibly shares those same concerns—not simply the same vocabulary.

That said, a shared vocabulary can be a helpful place to start. For example, while Christ’s stigmata derive from the same root word as the other marks in scripture, these holy scars escape a stigmatized reading—presenting the opportunity for a fruitful application of a tattoo hermeneutic.

For many Christians, characterizing Christ’s scars as self-inflicted may amount to mean-spirited blasphemy. But even the combination of trinitarian theology and the traditional (supersessionist) reading of Isaiah 53:10—“it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain”—is enough to argue that the crucifixion was a soteriologically powerful yet self-inflicted form of suffering. And given what we have seen about Chin women’s creedal purposes for facial tattooing, along with reading Thomas’s words about Jesus’ wounds in John 20:24 through a tattoo hermeneutic, such a critique fails to hold much water.

Relatedly, we’ve seen that tattoos and other self-inflicted scars are attempts at communicating about one’s identity to another. In this sense, we ought to ask ourselves, “Did Jesus, like the Chin women in Myanmar, subject himself to the trauma of scarification and, in his case, death with the intent to communicate something to any kind of audience?” Of course he did—see John 3:16–17.

Not only were Christ's scars consensually inflicted, but they remained marked on his post-resurrection body as a salvific testament to God's love. By all accounts, the stigmata are self-inflicted scars in the same genre as the Chin women's facial tattoos, and we've seen this understanding lived out through religious zealotry for centuries—from medieval holy stigmatics like Saint Francis of Assisi to modern stigmata induction. As Allison Backman explains in a 2011 essay in *Encephalon*:

Even in the context of hunger-striking, fasting, or stigmata-induction, self-injury is used with political or religious implications. . . . Because the religious and political realms are respected and understood in our culture, the self-injurious practices from these contexts are largely ignored or unquestioned by society. In all of these cases, self-injurious behaviors are sanctioned because the values that they represent are important within our Western culture.

So, then, there is precedent to read Christ's presentation of the stigmata in John 20:24–29 as a presentation of self-inflicted scars akin to the tattooed faces of Chin women.

Viewed through the Chin women's facial tattooing practices, we would expect to view Christ's scars in John's narrative as (1) beautiful (2) identity markers that (3) assuage a community amid turbulent circumstances and (4) function eschatologically, piercing the veil between life and death to (5) carry creedal memory alongside rituals of remembrance for future generations. The Thomas pericope is best known for the disciple's call for proof: "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" (v. 25). This is similar to the premarital proof demonstration of Indigenous facial tattoos in Taiwan that Krutak recounts:

101-year-old Atayal elder Iwal Kainu of Taiwan [testified] . . . "No man would marry an Atayal woman without facial tattoos and no woman would marry a man who did not have facial markings." She continued, "I do not regret my tattoos and I am very proud of them because it is an honorable tradition and the mark of an ideal Atayal woman."

In both cases, fidelity is withheld until a mark of identity can be shown. Moreover, scars function in both contexts not only to prove one's identification but to present testimony in support of one's deeper identity and role within the larger communal narrative: Jesus is Lord, and a tattooed Atayal woman is an ideal Atayal woman. Further, Jesus as Lord alludes to an additional feature of scars: their eschatological import.

Upon seeing the scars on his friend's hands and being invited to reopen wounds of fleshy memory, Thomas exclaims, "My Lord and my God!" (v. 28). This is a spiritual recognition and a homecoming. Like Chin women who enter the life beyond and are recognized through their facial tattoos by their ancestors, Thomas sees a friend he had thought lost to darkness now standing before him, bearing the memory of trauma not in death but in victory—an ontological reversal with hope for life and reunion beyond death told by scars.

Jesus' scars, then, mark a metaphysical change, a fundamental shift in his identity as well as in the fabric of his community through the pain he bore. This shift is mirrored in Chin women's maturation through the agonizing process of receiving facial tattoos. "The 'coming of age' for a Chin woman is respected and celebrated through facial tattooing. Her pain and struggle is seen as a necessary step in growing up," remarks Lisa Crosswhite in her essay in Parkitny's *Marked for Life*.

This reappropriation of pain—the utilization of rituals to control and construe meaning out of suffering—would have been especially important for Thomas and the rest of the disciples at this moment in time. Following the state execution of Jesus, the disciples found themselves living in a turbulent homeland, with the threat of being

hunted down by the authorities hanging as an ever-present anxiety over them. Looking at the Chin women's particular care to observe facial tattooing rituals when their communities were confronted by social threat and trauma, we would expect to see similar rituals constructed in early Christian circles, seeking to co-opt Christ's scarred body as a means to compartmentalize external trauma. That is exactly what we see in the communal, creedal memory of the Eucharist: Christ's body and blood, "given for you."

Jesus' response to Thomas's belief in John 20:29 is often read as a chastisement of Thomas's faith-by-sight. When Christ's stigmata are read as an intentional form of communication in line with tattoos and self-scarred skin, however, this chastisement is softened, and the blessing of those who believe without seeing instead shoulders the weight of empathetic melancholy. The text reads, "Then Jesus told him, 'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'" Behind Jesus' response is his skin's memory of agony and his scars' testimony of an identity born out of suffering.

After seeing Jesus, Thomas walks back his proclamation that he would need to push his hand into the wound gaping in his friend's side. Jesus' response, then, takes Thomas's faith just one step further. It is an empathetic belief without needing to see the scars—though still knowing that they are there—that is the blessing, and those who offer such accompaniment are the blessed. It is a blessing because such empathy refuses to flatten self-scarring into self-harm. Instead, it chooses to perceive scars and tattoos as creedal memory: a language of belonging that bears identity with permanence, instrumentalizing pain to tell a life-affirming story.

According to Kilby, "the 'success' of any testimony depends on its relation to the reader and whether they will cite in response the speech act: 'I hear you.'" By learning from the Chin women in Myanmar that self-scarring can be communication engraved into flesh and across one's face, we are better equipped to read Christ's stigmata as a testimony in and of itself—afflicted by beauty and pregnant with memories of pain, yet altogether proclaiming Jesus' identity with accuracy and exaggeration such that even the doubter exclaims, *I see you. I hear you. Jesus, "my Lord and my God!"*