

**Holeyness**  
John 20:19-29

My cousin, Allison, is a professional golfer. Now, I'm not much into golf and really don't follow it beyond knowing who Tiger Woods and Phil Mickelson are, but when the LPGA tour brought Allison to Denver one summer back in the early '80's I thought I probably ought to go and watch her play. She was family and all. There was only one problem. I didn't know what she looked like. She was family, just not very close family. I had only visited her family twice in my life, and hadn't seen any of them since I was about 10. I had no idea if she was tall, short, had dark hair or light, was slightly built like my mom, or stocky like me. In fact, I had to ask a marshal (I think that's what they are called) to point her out to me. But the minute I laid eyes on her, I knew who she was. I recognized her by her calves, the Finney calves. A trait all the women in the family share, apparently.

The story we just read, the story of the first Easter evening, is not a story about proof, but a story about recognition.

Despite what had happened that morning, life doesn't seem to have changed much for the disciples. They are still a quivering mass of fear and confusion, huddled together behind closed and locked doors. Three of them have seen the empty tomb. One of them, Mary, has seen Jesus himself. They understand, to some degree at least, that Jesus has risen from the dead, and while I'm sure that they are no doubt glad of that, I'm equally sure they hadn't forgotten that the religious authorities tried to re-kill Lazarus after he was raised from the dead. He was too much of a threat to them. And if *he* was a threat to them, having come back from the grave, then how much more of a threat would the disciples be, having seen the empty grave of Jesus, apparently confirming what he'd said all along? They were afraid, legitimately afraid, that what had happened to Jesus would happen to them, too. If they had found any comfort in Jesus' appearance to Mary that morning, it certainly isn't evident.

And for some reason, Thomas isn't there with them that evening. We don't know if they sent him out for more coffee, or if he just couldn't take the tension anymore and had to get out and go for a walk, but for some reason, he is gone, and it is on this absentee disciple that many of my friends and colleagues this morning will be preaching on this morning; his doubt and his demand for proof. But here's the thing: when Jesus showed the disciples his hands and feet it wasn't so that they would *believe* in him, but so they would *recognize* him. Remember that Mary didn't recognize him that morning. She thought he was the gardener. Re-animated Lazarus looked like his old self, but resurrected Jesus didn't, apparently. Whatever his distinguishing features had been – a gray streak in his beard, gentle eyes, long legs, dimples – he must not have had them anymore. His appearance must have been altered in some way. And so he shows them

the holes, the places in his hands and feet where they had driven the spikes in as they nailed him to the cross. The hole in his side where the soldiers had driven the spear in to be certain that he was dead.

I wonder if it is possible for us to begin to comprehend the wonder of it, that the risen Christ retained the marks of his suffering? That everything else about him was altered somehow, but his wounds were still visible. It's as if they were the most important thing about him, the trait that defines him. His wounds would be his identifying feature. The thing that would enable his disciples to recognize him.

You can see the significance of that first resurrection appearance to the disciples, can't you? Jesus didn't come back and melt the faces off of the Pharisees or Caiaphas or Herod. Thunder and lightning didn't explode from the heavens to express divine displeasure. He didn't appear to them with his shiny new halo and choirs of angels. Jesus came back and showed his disciples his hands and feet, his wounds. Not just proof that it was really him, but a sign of who he really was; what God is like. In Hollywood's hands God has been made into a detached deity who does tricks, and makes people cower in fear with his deep booming voice, but in Jesus' hands we see a completely different God. A God who suffers with the world, and for the sake of the world. A God who is identified by his suffering. That is how we know it is Jesus – his wounds, not his holiness or his righteous vengeance or even his goodness. We recognize him by his willingness to turn the other cheek. To forgive the soldiers and Caiaphas and Herod for mocking him and beating him and spitting on him; for nailing his hands and feet to the cross, and thrusting a spear into his side.

And if that is the case, then Jesus really couldn't have meant what we think he did when he said we now have the power to forgive or retain sins, could he? If Jesus forgave the people who condemned him, and the centurions who drove the nails into his hands and feet, can we really do otherwise? Do we really have the power to retain the sins of the people who hurt us with cutting or thoughtless words?

Parents who did a less than stellar job raising us?

Partners who cheat on us?

A co-worker who takes credit for work we did?

A drunk driver who takes the most precious thing we have?

Can we decide what is forgivable and what isn't? Who is forgivable, and who isn't? Do we really want that power? If Jesus was known by his wounds, should we be known by anything else?

“Peace be with you,” Jesus said to them three times. And as the late Mennonite New Testament scholar John Howard Yoder reminds us, the way to peace, the *only* way to peace, is through forgiveness. He writes, “Jesus instructs his disciples, simply and clearly, not to resist evil and to love one's enemy....Christians love their enemies because

God does so. That is the only reason, and that is enough. No one created in God's image and for whom Christ died can be for me an enemy..."

It sounds like a tough way to live, doesn't it?

Bowing to the brutality and thoughtlessness of the people around us.

Allowing unkind words to go unanswered, at least with equally barbed words.

Not defending yourself against the lies and rumors whispered about you behind your back.

Not suing the person who wrongs you.

Not trying to right the wrongs done to you.

Not fighting back, no matter how unjustly you have been treated.

Not hurting the one who has hurt you.

Letting yourself be betrayed... kicked... beaten... spit on... called names...humiliated ... Bearing the wounds that have been inflicted on you, and forgiving each and every living soul who put them there, until we look like Jesus.

The scene that John paints for us on Easter eve is a sad one. The disciples are lost, confused, afraid, until Jesus comes along and shows them his hands and his feet – the holes, the wounds. It is a strange comfort, if you think about it, his brokenness.

Maybe we've been going about it all wrong. In fact, I'm sure of it. In our zeal to be good spokespersons for God we set out to prove God's existence to those who struggle to believe, and spell out clearly what is right and what is wrong to those who clearly do not know the difference. We wave the banner of repentance in the faces of those we fear are playing with fire. And then we wonder why it is that no one seems interested. They are not as enamored with God as we are. We wonder why our young people stick around long enough to be confirmed and then slip away.

What kind of God are we proclaiming? Not the same God Jesus was when he put out his hands and feet with their still visible wounds, the signs of a God who suffers and forgives. "Peace be with you," Jesus says to his disciples, as he invites us to suffer and forgive as well.