The Witness of Wounds, a sermon in response to John 20:19-31 and 1 Peter 1:3-9 by Rev. Scot McCachren at the First Presbyterian Church of East Hampton, April 19, 2018.

This morning I feel a little better-rested than when I stood in the pulpit last week to preach my Easter sermon. Holy Week takes a toll with so much going on. The way things are in the world now, those last couple of days – Friday and then Saturday (which somehow blended into Sunday morning without much of a transition). I got all wrapped up in my writing, and wrapped up in cameras and microphones: at the manse, the beach, the sanctuary..., uploading..., downloading..., editing..., problem-solving..., posting... +++ Then it was done. I had a chance to look up again – take a breath – +++ and realize... I’m still living in the midst of a lockdown... a dangerous world where we have to be careful who we see – and where we go... So I retreated back into the house with Linda. – After a long a tiring week – we closed the doors, locked them,... and spent the rest of Easter Sunday in safety. +++ +++ Maybe your Easter was something like that, as well: “He is Risen! Alleluia! Now, lock the doors and hunker down.” +++ I couldn’t blame you. +++ And... we’re in good company: that’s exactly what the disciples did.

For them, it had been a long and tiring 40 days or so leading up to their triumphant entry into Jerusalem with Jesus – then a dramatic and exhausting week swept them into controversy and heartbreak. Finally, just this morning, Peter and another, unnamed, disciple saw the empty tomb – and... immediately returned to their homes. They were all stunned when Mary Magdalene followed just a little while later to tell them, “I have seen the Lord!”... and she told them everything she had seen. +++ So, what did they do when they got that wonderful news from Mary? What did they do when they heard Jesus had risen from the dead?... Well..., they gathered in a house (all except Thomas),... and locked the doors... because it was dangerous – out there. Sounds familiar, doesn’t it?

Now, today’s gospel reading is about Thomas. And, I think we need to cut Thomas a break – just a little, anyway. Really! He’s always remembered by the nickname: “Doubting Thomas.” That’s because of this passage, where he says, “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.” +++ One thing we do have to give Thomas credit for is his honesty. At least he’s honest... He’s committed to Jesus but always seems to be the one to speak up about his doubts.: +++ Earlier, the disciples had tried to talk Jesus out of going to Jerusalem because the Jews there were trying to kill him – but Jesus responded that no one would hurt him because it wasn’t time for him to die yet. +++ Not “time” for him to die?!??! Thomas wasn’t buying that... so he had spoken up – and said what everyone else was probably thinking: “Well, let’s go with him – at least [when they kill him],... we’ll die with him.” +++ Thomas is committed to Jesus – he’s ready to die for him – but not always ready to jump in with both feet.... not always ready to give up skepticism, and simply believe what he is told – even by the most trustworthy of people. +++ A lot of people are like that, even now, aren’t they? They don’t want to believe something until they see it with their own eyes. +++ And, you know, I think we are actually judging Thomas by a different standard than the rest of the disciples. Let’s look more closely at exactly how this whole narrative unfolds... Back on Easter afternoon, the other disciples were hiding in that house with locked doors because they were afraid. They knew nobody else could possibly be in there with them and nobody could get in without them knowing it... +++ Then... suddenly... Jesus was simply standing there among them... Then he showed them his hands and his side – before they could even ask. Jesus just showed up, said “Peace be with you,” and started showing them his wounds. The rest of the disciples never had a chance to go on-record about whether they believed it or not. +++ But – if you notice – it is only AFTER Jesus shows his wounds to prove who he is that they rejoice – and he breathes the gift of the Holy Spirit upon them. +++ They SEE the wounds first!... +++ Thomas doesn’t get the benefit of any of that. I wonder how they would have done if they had been in Thomas’s position. +++ Here he is – he comes home late – and I’m sure he can tell right away that he missed something... and then the other disciples all start talking at the same time, telling him, “You missed it, man – We saw the Lord! Jesus came back from the dead.” … The same Jesus that he saw crucified, dead, and buried – with his own eyes. +++ Thomas would have LOVED to believe it – I’m sure he WANTED it to be true – but, as always, Thomas was honest
about his misgivings. +++ “I just can’t get there, guys – I can’t believe it unless I see it for myself – unless I see the wounds from the nails – unless I can touch it and feel it for myself… I just can’t get there with you.” +++

Doubting Thomas. +++ It’s easy to call him that name and hold him up as an example of someone with insufficient faith… Call him a LOSER… +++ But, in fairness, it’s not easy being a disciple of Jesus, is it? – For Thomas or anyone… Just think about what we’ve seen from the people standing in that room over the past week – Jesus washed their feet and promised to prepare a place for them in heaven – then they promptly abandoned him, denied they’ve ever even known him, watched him die – most from a safe distance – and stayed in the background as someone else took his body and sealed it in a tomb… And NOW, they are hiding in a house… – with the door locked. +++ Too afraid to tell the world what they’ve seen – too afraid to get out there and start a church. +++ This is really low moment for the disciples… I wonder if they thought back to some of the people they had run into with Jesus over the years – people they judged or looked down on at the time – +++ people like the Samaritan Woman at the Well, who came to believe that Jesus might be the Messiah and immediately went and told everyone in her town to come out to see him… and believe in him… +++ People like the poor Blind Man Jesus had healed, who immediately started arguing with Pharisees that Jesus must be sent by God, or else he would not have had the power to heal him. +++ I wonder if the disciples remembered people like that – all locked up, afraid, in their house – and felt shame.

So – it’s not just Thomas! Everyone who follows Jesus falls short sometimes. Everyone needs to see the wounds sometimes to help them believe. +++ And how does Jesus react to that??? Yes…, he points out the ideal, that it’s better to believe without seeing: – BUT what does Jesus do when Thomas needs more? Does he become angry? Does he judge Thomas? ... NO! +++ He comes back for him – he speaks directly to Thomas – he shows him the marks on his hands – he shows him the wound in his side… Jesus gives Thomas what he needs – the Witness of his Wounds.

That was an important moment in the life of the church: Thomas and Jesus talking about the nature of true and abiding faith... – how to reinforce it... – how to respond to doubt... – here, as the final Gospel draws to a close;… +++ A gospel written at the end of an era – when the First Century was in its final years – when there soon would be no one left of the generation that eye-witnessed Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. +++ It was also dangerous moment for the church. That’s reflected in our Epistle reading – which was written about the same time as the Gospel of John:: “Although you have not seen him… you love him; and even though you do not see him now,… you believe in him and rejoice…” +++ And so, right there, in front of the other disciples… Jesus and Thomas… the messiah and the faithful doubter… are talking honestly about faith – about what faith can, ultimately, BE, for true believers who listen to... /share their lives with... /and love other believers. +++ But... this moment... Jesus coming back, just so he could share his wounds with Thomas,... this moment also demonstrates what you sometimes have to do – when you’re bringing the truth of the Gospel to the world... – to help people past their skepticism... – help them past their fear... – help them open their minds and their hearts to Christ. +++ Before people will listen to us, Jesus reminds us, it makes such a huge difference for them to know where we have been – to hear about our own journey – what led us to where we are... Where are the scars of our wounds? +++ Faith... is more... than just words – it’s more than just accepting some creeds or dogma that were written before you were born by somebody you’ll never know… +++ Faith is… born… and it grows... in those hidden places where the bewildering moments of life intersect with God – where you begin to see how Christ is alive in you – when you learn to witness the hand of the Holy Spirit at work in the world.

My friends, at this moment, we are living through a time of isolation – a time of fear... Maybe it can help us understand why the disciples were locked up tight in that house – why they were afraid to come out. They had good reason to be afraid. Just like we have good reason, under threat from this deadly virus, to recoil from contact with our friends and neighbors – ...contact even with our church family. Our world... has... good reason to retreat into our homes like the disciples retreated when Jesus’ lifeless body was laid inside that tomb... +++ This moment helps us understand the trauma they had been through. And, this moment helps us understand why Christ appeared to them – patiently – why he did not judge or chastise them – but gladly showed the Witness of
his Wounds – before breathing the power of the Holy Spirit upon them and commissioning them to the work that lay ahead. +++ I think it helps us understand Thomas’s doubt, as well. +++ +++

And maybe, this moment of isolation we are in now – our moment of backing away – closing our doors to protect ourselves from a persistent and intimidating force – can help us understand why so many people seem to have closed their doors to the Church. +++ Not to the gospel, mind you… +++ Not to the existence of God – or that there is Good News to be lived and shared – people still hunger and thirst for the Word of God as much as ever.:: As of last night, our Sunrise Service video has 135 views. Good Friday has 162… Sunday service on March 29, 225… March 22, 251. All of these are at least 3 times what we’d usually expect for those services. People crave a connection with God. +++ BUT, our world is becoming more and more closed to the Church (capital ‘C’, universal Church) – a Church whose loudest voices are those of judgement, self-righteousness, and privilege. +++ +++ ++++++ People are looking for ways to connect with God – ways to connect with Jesus Christ. But more and more, they withdraw in fear,… or by distraction,… or simply because the Church has fails to express the true love and grace of Christ. +++ +++ Whatever the reason, this moment of isolation helps us see the world of souls, retreated together – crowded into that house of loneliness with the door locked – protected, somehow, they think, from a church that judges them – that doesn’t care about them – that has grown irrelevant to this modern life – or that’s hostile, even, to their own values of compassion and tolerance. +++ And – like Thomas – I think they’d LOVE to believe in more – they LONG to be a part of the Body of Christ. +++ But when all they hear are words, liturgies, and creeds that they really don’t understand:: +++ – they just can’t get there with us. +++– This world needs the followers of Christ to open up – to be vulnerable. The world needs the Witness of our own Wounds… like Christ patiently showing his hands and his side to Thomas. They need us to confess our weaknesses – and tell how we’ve been strengthened by the Lord;:: to confess our errors – and tell how we’re forgiven by our savior, every day.

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A year or so ago, I saw a report on CNN about a young man named Shanduke McPhatter. He grew up on the streets of the Brooklyn projects – hungry and afraid. As a teenager, Shanduke was angry – and he turned to petty theft, then armed robbery, just to put food in his stomach. Looking back now, he says, I had “no leadership in my life, No meaning, Nothing to live for.” +++ He joined the Bloods gang at 16. He spent about a decade behind bars. Violence. Drugs. He lost friends – and a brother – to violence. +++ He knows despair. +++ But now – Shanduke is the founder of a non-profit that helps at-risk youth stay off the streets through a variety of programs. +++ Every day, he uses his own past as a case study – in what NOT to do – “You don’t have to go down the paths I went down.” +++ But when they do… and they often do… The Witness of Shanduke’s Wounds keeps them listening – makes them believe:: HE came back from this pain – so can I. I can still live a life that means something – I can still make a difference in this world.

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“Then Jesus 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!” +++ +++ The Good NEWS is that Christ comes back for us because he loves us and we are worth it to him. – He offers his scars as testimony – and we believe. +++ +++ But NOW, IT’S OUR TURN… As the Body of Christ in the world today – a world that desperately needs our witness to his love and grace – I think we need to do more than just open those front doors, repeat the story, and expect the world to flock back to these pews. +++ Instead of judging the world’s doubt – judging people for staying away – we have to show up for them – and give our witness to them – because Christ loves them – we… love… them… and they are worth it… +++ We need to look within ourselves, then open up, showing exactly how alive Christ is within us… We need to show the wounds where we’ve been broken and he has patched us back together – or maybe reveal the places where he is still at work on us. +++ We need to tell our stories. ++++++ Our witness to this broken world:: – a world that hunger for heavenly food – that thirsts for Living Water – that longs to be Born Again From Above… our witness to this world begins with our own stories. Our own witness to how Christ turns our darkness to light. ++++++ So this morning, I’m wondering what wounds you’re willing to share – what challenges you’ve faced (and maybe face still today)?… Where have you fallen short?… Who have you hurt – or when were you hurt? +++ When did you need grace – and how did God deliver grace to you? +++ When have you seen the Holy Spirit at work in your
life?+++ When have you felt the forgiving mercy of Jesus Christ? +++ +++ +++ Let’s share our witness to the wounds that gave us these scars – how some of our injuries remain open – and how others were healed: All to the glory of God. +++ Then – perhaps – they will be ready to know more about this Jesus Christ – and the radical things he’s dying… to do… for them.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.