

April 12, 2026—The Second Sunday of Easter
The Rev. James Wyatt

The Mark of the Nails

There was an idea bouncing around in the late first century (when the Gospel of John was written) called Docetism. The word comes from a Greek word meaning “to seem,” and it’s related to the word for an apparition, a phantom or an illusion. And the idea is that Jesus was a divine being who only *seemed* to be human. He looked like flesh, he appeared to live and die like one of us, but that was just an illusion.

Basically, the more that Christianity got tangled up with Greek philosophy and its notions of the Divine, the harder it was for people to accept the painful fact of Jesus’ mortality. This is why Paul describes the cross as “foolishness to Gentiles” in his first letter to the Corinthians. If God is eternal and unchanging, then it is impossible for God to suffer and unthinkable that God could die. So a lot of people came to believe some pretty wacky things about what happened in the last week of Jesus’ life: that the Jesus on the cross was just a phantasm, a mirage, or that it was someone else made to look like him, or that the human Jesus on the cross had been abandoned by the divine Christ. And in their view, then, the resurrection was about this unsuffering, unchanging, undying divine being making his true self known to his disciples at last.

So this idea was bouncing around in the late first century, and the Gospel of John includes some language meant to refute it in no uncertain terms. The divine Word, John says, became flesh. Not “took on human guise” or “adopted a human appearance” but became flesh. And then there’s this story we heard this morning.

On the one hand, it almost sounds like a ghost story: “Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them.” Like a phantom, the risen Jesus can pass through locked doors! But no, this story is all about the physical body of Jesus. “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” —in the wound where the spear pierced him— “I will not believe,” Thomas says.

So we call him “doubting Thomas” to this day, but I certainly don’t hold it against him. I don’t think he doubted because he was skeptical of the divinity of Jesus. I think, first of all, he just wanted the same experience that the rest of the disciples had, to see the risen Jesus face to face, to embrace his dear friend again. But also, I think he wanted to know that all the suffering and grief and disappointment of the last week was real. That it mattered.

If Jesus wasn’t fully human, if he wasn’t actually flesh—if his suffering in his final days was just some kind of trick—I think Thomas would have felt betrayed. And rightly so! To go through all that—to have all his hopes crushed, all his expectations of the Messiah ground into the dirt, to have the man he had come to love beaten and killed before his eyes—and then for that man to show up and say, “ha, just kidding, LOL”—what kind of God, what kind of savior would pull such a cruel trick on his followers?

Thomas needed to know that all of it was real: Jesus’ arrest, his abuse, his torment, his death. He needed to see and touch the wounds inflicted on his beloved teacher, to know they were real. And then, only then, could he hope to accept that the resurrection was real too.

You know, I see where Thomas was coming from. Life is hard. It involves entirely too much pain—physical and otherwise—and I’m not here hoping that at the end of my life God will pull back the curtain and say, “Ta-da! That was all an illusion, a trick, a cruel, cruel joke. Now it’s over and your suffering doesn’t matter any more!”

No. It does matter. It happened, it’s happening, and it **stinks**—and it’s a part of who I am.

The resurrection of Jesus didn’t undo his suffering and death. The risen Christ still bore not just scars, but the open wounds of his execution, still real, still a part of him. His ascension back into heaven didn’t undo his incarnation—the Word became flesh and he didn’t leave that flesh behind when he returned to God. God became human so that humanity could be transformed, could become divine. God entered into human experience, even the most painful

death, so that all of human experience could be redeemed in his resurrection. As I said last week, there is no part of our lives or our deaths that is alien to God, nothing we can go through that God doesn't know from personal experience. Jesus lived a human life so that we can meet God in every part of our human lives.

And that includes all the pain, all the wounds we carry. It's all real, it all matters, and God is in it all.

When Thomas put his hands in the wounds of his Lord and his God, he saw that the wounds were real, that all the suffering Thomas and Jesus had been through was real—and that there was warmth in Jesus' body, that Jesus' resurrection was real, too.

And it is real, even for us, “who have not seen and yet have come to believe,” who celebrate the risen Christ from the distance of centuries. Our pain and grief and illness are real, but so is life, so is love and joy, so is hope—and the life and love and joy and hope of God are made real to us in God's own body. Jesus' hands, wounded as they are, still do reach out to us, to bring us life and love and joy and hope and healing.

Amen.