

Life-Giving Hands

Isaiah 49:15-16 (NIV)

¹⁵ “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! ¹⁶ See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me.

It’s a new day, a new morning, a day to leave the darkness behind because...Christ is risen; he is risen indeed! Alleluia!

We came today with smiles and shouts of Easter praise, but is there some darkness still hovering, still haunting your life, threatening to creep in some more? Some of us are coming back after leaving here on Friday night in darkness, the hammer strikes that pounded nails into Jesus’ hands and the gravelly closing of the rock in front of Jesus’ tomb was ringing in our ears. There is still some darkness even on this morning.

It was probably that way for Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome on that very first Easter morning. They had been there on Friday, watching from a distance. The sadness and the grief still hanging on to them – losing not just a good friend, a wise teacher, a miracle worker, but also their Savior. They saw where his body was laid. They had to wait a full day to fully pay their respects, planning and preparing to anoint Jesus’ dead body with spices, grieving at home as the minutes passed by agonizingly slowly. As light was just starting to dawn and they were heading to Jesus’ tomb, they fully expected him to still be dead as they asked each other, “Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?” (verse 3)

Then they received the surprise of a lifetime! “When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. “Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.’ ” (verses 4-7)

Joy! Elation! This is the happiest day, right? No more darkness! But how did the women respond? “Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.” (verse 8) Afraid because this holy being, an angel, spoke to them. Afraid because Jesus, the one who was crucified, was gone. Crucified. A dark reminder of two days ago, almost hidden in the angel’s announcement. The images of Jesus on the cross came back in focus. The hammer strikes rung in their ears. The scene of Jesus’ lifeless body flashed before them. The darkness is coming back.

We know from other parts of the Bible that Jesus appeared specifically to these women and to his disciples. Jesus showed them his hands and his sides. They saw where the nails and spear had pierced his flesh. When the disciples told Thomas that Jesus had appeared before them in the flesh, fully alive, Thomas demanded to see the holes in Jesus’ hands where the nails had been driven through. Jesus obliged and came the next Sunday and showed him explicitly. He really had been crucified.

These scars from Jesus’ crucifixion, they keep the cross in view, even on Easter, even as Jesus triumphed over death. These scars made it real that Jesus had truly died on the cross, suffered death. But the fact that he was standing there before them alive made it clear that death did not contain him. The grave could not hold him down. No, he showed his mastery over death, conquered it with the fatal blow of his resurrection. Death could not overpower Jesus. His physically alive body, his eating and drinking before them, proved this. His mortal body was now immortal, the perishable made imperishable. Death was defeated by Jesus on this Easter day! The darkness of Friday is pushed away.

Yet, the scars were still there on his palms. As the disciples stared at those scars, as maybe they poked their fingers into the holes, what did they think? Did they see the scars and feel a pang of guilt? Did they keep glancing away because those scars reminded them of how much Jesus suffered for them? Did they see these scars on Jesus’ palms as the punishment that they should have received? Did they see these scars as a constant reminder of what they owed Jesus, like it was some kind of receipt for their sins, a bill that they now owed him and would have to pay him back with humility and repentance and good deeds?

Can’t we just forget the scars? Can’t we forget the suffering and death of that Friday? Can’t we just be happy on this Easter morning that Christ is risen?!

As God, Jesus had the power to remove those scars from his resurrected body, but he kept them. He purposefully kept them. And they did tell a story. The story was not, “Remember that you owe me,” a message of dark indebtedness. No. It was a totally different

story, a story prophesied hundreds of years earlier through Isaiah. “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I [the LORD] will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.” (verses 15-16a) Those scars told the story that the Lord has had compassion on you and will never forget his freely given love for you.

Conscious of your sin, conscious of your and my inability to take away our sins, God alleviated them from us. He took the whole debt of our sins and paid for it, the whole price. But he is not our creditor. He asks for no repayment, not good deeds, not humility, not even repentance. His nail-pierced scars tell us that there is not something you must do before, a way you must live, an action you must take before his payment is good. No, he fully paid it, and there is nothing more owed, not to God, not to Jesus, not to anyone. As Jesus himself taught in parables like the Prodigal Son, the Father, who represents God, takes no repayment from the wayward son who squandered all his wealth before it should have belonged to him. God is the merciful master who canceled a debt to a man that would have taken him several lifetimes to repay without asking for a single coin in compensation, without even so much as apology for creating such a debt. It was simply gone. Not a single debt of sin clings to you or me any longer.

This is what Jesus’ Easter scars mean. All of our wrongs, all of our sins – done knowingly or unknowingly, done once or done thousands of times – they were completely canceled and done away with on the cross. Because he came back from the dead, those scars tell us that our sins are fully paid for with nothing owed back ever.

God wants us to see these scars on his palms so that we never forget that our sins are completely paid for. Before you decided to come and worship our risen Lord today, you were engraved on his palms, a message that you are forgiven. No matter if a day went by and you didn’t think of the Lord, you were still engraved on his palms as your debt of sin was completely paid for and eliminated. He remembered. Even when you went through times in your life when you didn’t care about God, when you didn’t want him in your life, he still wore those scars on his palms and that message.

God never forgets you, never forgets what he has paid for you. His payment for your sins is not contingent on how hard you repent, on whether or not you ever commit the same sin again. These scars will never disappear. His love and forgiveness for you is permanent, unquestionable, unwavering. He never forgets that you are forgiven and wants you to always see the same message. Your sins are fully paid; nothing is owed at all. These are Jesus’ life-giving hands here on Easter Sunday.

Yes, even on Easter, we see Jesus’ scars. We remember the cross. But those scars are not to guilt you. They’re not a call from Jesus that you owe him. It’s the opposite message. Those scars on his palms are how much God loves you. These scars mean that the payment for your sins was fully made with nothing owed to anyone, that this fact is never in doubt. God will never forget that your sins are paid for. We might forget. A mother might forget the baby nursing at her breast. That’s more likely than God ever forgetting that he has taken away your sins. Those scars mean that you are engraved on the palms of his hands. His scars mean that you are fully forgiven with nothing owed. Those scars are Jesus freely giving us eternal life with him. This takes away any darkness on this day because Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen!