

Why do we prefer faded scars to open wounds?

## **Maybe Christianity's best appeal is its courage in the face of all that wounds, rips, and ravages.**

by [Debie Thomas](#) in the [April 22, 2020](#) issue



Photo © Prostock-Studio / iStock / Getty

A few years ago, when my daughter and I were looking at college websites, we began to track the buzzwords that admissions offices use to highlight the qualities they most value: “High achievement.” “Success.” “Accomplishment.” “Attainment.”

After several such Google field trips, my daughter looked at me in frustration. “They want battle scars,” she said bitterly. “Not open wounds.”

Her remark stopped me cold. I don’t know if it’s an accurate assessment of college admissions in the US these days, though I suspect it is. What struck me is how painfully relevant it is to the church.

In my experience, Christians put a lot of stock in triumph. We value the race won, the mountain scaled, the enemy defeated, the obstacle overcome. Sure, we welcome stories of sin and struggle, too, but we much prefer to share those stories

in retrospect, after the sordid worst is over. Sin that has surrendered to holiness? That's a worthy Christian story. But sin that clings? Challenges that won't ease up? A wound that festers or a doubt that deepens? We squirm a little. We worry.

Why? I'm sure there are several reasons, but here are a few I've been considering.

**We view conversion as a onetime event.** In the churches that raised me, this was explicitly the case. Sunday services culminated in altar calls, and the pastors who invited people to accept Jesus into their hearts told them to mark the specific moment as pivotal: "Today is the day of your salvation."

But the problem isn't unique to churches that issue altar calls. Many of us who are baptized, confessing Christians feel uncomfortable with the messy, long haul of conversion. We expect a disinfected tidiness in our faith lives and a decorous reserve in our Sunday services. Open wounds don't usually have a place in our pews.

Yet I've rarely experienced instant transformation; the changes that matter have always come sideways and in fits and starts. Anyone who has battled an addiction, stuck it out in a challenging relationship, lived with chronic pain, or suffered from anxiety knows that genuine conversion is lifelong. Maybe this is why early Christians referred to their new faith as "the Way": not a destination but an invitation to journey, one slow step at a time.

**We act as if God were made of fine china.** Though we profess faith in a robust God, we secretly fear for our divinity's ego. Won't it shatter if our spiritual lives get too complicated? Won't we wound God's honor if we confess to ongoing rage, doubt, terror, or despair? Isn't God safest when our lives reflect heaven's undimmed glory?

I hope not, because the human cost of tiptoeing around God's delicacy is staggering. I've watched myself and so many of the people I love do this. We'll dare for just an instant to name an honest experience: "I'm so furious at God right now," or, "My faith is doing nothing for me in the midst of this pain." Then immediately we'll back away as if lightning might strike at any moment: "But it's OK; I'm still blessed!"

What's at stake here is not whether such a faith claim is true. What's at stake is authenticity: our willingness to be vulnerable, to hold deep faith and scorching honesty in uncomfortable tension. What does this God of ours want, anyway? Is God really so invested in shiny pretense? In a flattening of our lived experience? If the

God we've staked our lives on is really too fragile to bear the truth of our lives, then why have we bothered with the Christian gospel in the first place?

**We misunderstand the nature of witness.** This might be the most dangerous reason we value battle scars over open wounds. We don't want to air dirty laundry. We don't want our secret struggles to poison our message as Christ's followers. How will Christianity appeal to people if it's not presented as beautifully as possible?

What helps me here is Jesus. The tears he sheds for Lazarus. His blood-soaked despair in Gethsemane. The whip he wields in the temple. And—most importantly—the scars he carries out of his own desolate grave. Jesus' resurrected body doesn't bear faded scars signaling a long-ago victory on a half-forgotten battlefield. They are fresh wounds, still raw enough to allow a doubting disciple to place his fingers into Jesus's side. Open wounds.

I imagine Jesus winces when Thomas touches him. That pain—that openness—signals real life and engagement. Real presence. It speaks the very words Thomas hungers for the most: *I am here. I don't float a few antiseptic feet above regular reality; I dwell in the hot, searing heart of things. Exactly where you dwell.*

Our culture loves the success story. All around us, people are packaging themselves, marketing themselves, pummeling themselves into forms of piety and prettiness they can't sustain. But if Jesus' honest expressions of grief, anger, and fear only drew more people to him, if even at the apex of his resurrection victory he won a doubter over with open wounds, then maybe we don't need to worry so much about glossy presentation. Maybe Christianity's best appeal is its courage in the face of what scars, rips, and ravages.

Our wounds don't tell the whole story. But the stories they do tell are holy. If Jesus didn't fear the bloody and the broken, perhaps we don't need to fear them so much, either.

*A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Open wounds."*