

ECHOING HOPE

HOW THE HUMANITY OF JESUS
REDEEMS OUR PAIN



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KURT WILLEMS

FOREWORD BY SCOT McKNIGHT

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Published in the United States by WaterBrook, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC.

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Trade Paperback ISBN 978-0-593-19350-1

eBook ISBN 978-0-593-19351-8

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Willems, Kurt, author.

Title: Echoing hope : how the humanity of Jesus redeems our pain / Kurt Willems.

Description: First edition. | Colorado Springs : WaterBrook, 2021. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020032977 | ISBN 9780593193501 (paperback) | ISBN 9780593193518 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Pain—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Suffering—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Jesus Christ—Humanity. | Jesus Christ—Example.

Classification: LCC BV4909 .W545 2021 | DDC 248.8/6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020032977>

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

waterbrookmultnomah.com

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

First Edition

Special Sales

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FOREWORD

* * *

I grew up in a kind of Christian faith that almost completely ignored Jesus.

We learned Jesus stories, to be sure, mostly in Sunday School classes, where we drew figures, colored inside the lines, and put images on flannel boards. But the “big people’s” gatherings were all about the apostle Paul, the Bible and theology, and fundamentalist commitments to certain behaviors, such as not smoking, chewing, or “going with girls that do.” These teachings focused on either abstract propositions or legalistic instructions. I would later understand that the Christian faith I was exposed to as a boy was not focused on Jesus as we find him in the Gospels—Jesus the *person*.

Later I began to discover that Jesus. That journey began in my first class in seminary, when my professor, Walter Liefeld, taught Synoptic Gospels in a way that put Jesus on center stage and God’s grace for us on full display. I was beginning to see Jesus the *person*. Sure, we talked kingdom theology and Matthew’s theology and all that academic stuff. But Jesus lurked in that classroom as a real presence. As someone who lived and died. As someone who was (and is) *real*.

He was like us in so many ways. But better yet, *we are like him in so many ways*. That’s why we need Jesus—a real human person who shows us how to live in a real, painful world.

Violence and pain are two of the oldest stories, and many people connect them to redemption in far too casual of a manner.

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Redemption doesn't permit us to pretend violence and pain aren't real. Neither does it excuse those who want to diminish or deaden the reality of the violence and pain by appealing to too-easy sentiments, such as "But I got saved! I got through it!" Worse yet, we can begin to believe the idea that "God did the violence and caused my suffering for my redemption."

In *Echoing Hope*, Kurt takes us into moments of pain and violence from his own life, but he does so with Jesus ever-present. Jesus's presence did not remove the pain, and it didn't provide a new method for living happily. Instead, Kurt shows us how it was about Jesus's presence in our pain, about God with us, and about our suffering with Jesus in his pain.

Reading Kurt's book means encountering pain—not good pain—but real, bad, awful, inner pain. When pain is caused by violence and injustice, the word *good* doesn't belong with the word *pain*. This book is not about how violence redeems, but about the redemption on the other side of violence.

We need Jesus to redeem Christian theology from abstraction. We need Jesus not only for what he accomplished—on the cross and through his resurrection and ascension—but also for all of who he was and is.

The real Jesus was rejected, accused, made fun of, yelled at in public places, exhausted, beaten, bruised, scratched, and humiliated on a cross, and then he died. No doubt, this bloody man likely suffocated to death in full view of his haters, friends, and followers. His mother was accused, his father seemed to be absent, his brothers didn't like him, and all the "righteous people" seemed to think he was nothing but trouble. They must have said aloud, "If he's not careful, he'll get us all in trouble and he'll get himself killed." Jesus knew pain and rejection throughout his life, which eventually culminated in the crucifixion.

We need that real Jesus because we, too, suffer. We need a God who knows our suffering, not one who knows *about* our suffering but one who knows what it's like to feel it—a God who *knows* our suffering. Without that God, our pain is remote from our Creator. We become an abstraction from a God who only knows us in the

way a drone peers into something out of our range. But because of the real, human Jesus—the one who suffered—God knows our pain firsthand.

Jesus stands with us in our suffering. Sometimes he's clearly present, and at other times he's not. But he's there because our suffering is his and his suffering is ours. When we hurt, we draw closer to Jesus—perhaps more than we realize, but we do. God loves us and knows our anguish because his Son, Jesus, suffered and God knew him in that suffering. Our grief is *personal* to God.

In Jesus's suffering there is hope. Why? Because we know what happened beyond the hideous cross: Easter happened and Easter still happens. Yes, in my life and Kurt's and yours.

Easter happens in this book.

Read it.

—Scot McKnight,
professor of New Testament, Northern Seminary

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Intr oductio n

JESUS, PAIN, AND BECOMING HUMAN

* * *

Echoes reverberate from an empty grave. Like a shout resonating from a canyon floor, sound waves bounce from stone walls in vacant caves back out into the world. Reflected noises resound, reminding us of the vast beauty of creation or the void of isolation. The hardened empty space required for echoes to exist keeps us in awe or fills us with dread. There is power in an echo: to inspire or overwhelm us. Echoes, depending on our perception, are filled with wonder or are signs of our desolation. Imagine the lost wanderer yelling for help but hearing only his own voice in response or, by contrast, the adventurer backpacking to a cliff of serene beauty and shouting for joy upon her arrival at the summit. We experience echoes differently depending on the position from which we hear them. In my childhood, the echoes were often hollow, fearful, and disorienting.

On a Sunday morning about two thousand years ago, a hollow tomb became a chamber of echoes. An empty tomb isn't usually good news. From ancient times, thieves have robbed burial sites. Think of royalty buried with their riches or enemies being dishonored even after death by the removal and desecration of their corpses. To remove a body from its sacred resting place dehumanizes the memory of the deceased.*

*I'm aware of a practice in the nineteenth century in which medical students would go body snatching and steal the remains of African Americans for experiments. *Detestable* doesn't begin to describe such a practice.

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Jarring is the moment in the Gospels when women arrived at the tomb of Jesus to find that he had gone missing. The alarm the women at Jesus’s graveside experienced at the words “He is not here” (Luke 24:5, nrsv) matches what many of us feel. The phrase brought dismay rather than hope. Jesus was gone in a moment when they needed him most. For those of us who believe—or who want to believe—in God, pain echoes at a decibel loud enough that we can become clouded with doubt. No wonder, when the disciple of Jesus ran into the tomb, the gospel of John says that he “believed . . . [but] didn’t yet understand” (20:8–9). Even today hope eludes when we consider many things in our world that reek of death:

Cancer	Losing a job
World hunger	Homelessness
Abuse of the vulnerable	HIV/AIDS
Student loan debt	Gun violence
Mental illness	Social inequity
Racism	Viral pandemics
Slavery	Wars and rumors of wars
Conflict with loved ones	Natural disasters
Patriarchy	Divorce
Child soldiers	Gravesides

And we’re just getting started. (Feel free to take a deep breath if you need one.)

Amid the pain and suffering that will come into our lives, how can we learn to love and live well? Actually, you are already acquainted with pain and suffering. This isn’t a theoretical exercise but involves a series of intimate hurts. We each hold them in our own way, but often our way doesn’t cultivate a holy and life-giving relationship to and through our pain. But when we look at Jesus, we see the one human being whose relationship to love and pain is worthy of imitation. (But probably don’t try that execution part.)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote, “Human beings become

human because God became human. . . . In Christ the form of human beings before God was created anew.”¹ God created us as humans, and when we look at Jesus, we see the prototype for what all humans are designed to become. As we look at the life of Jesus, we see someone who experienced joy and pain and everything in between. He was “impressed” (Matthew 8:10), “deeply grieved” (Matthew 26:38, nrsv), and “deeply disturbed” (John 11:33) and he “overflowed with joy” (Luke 10:21). In two situations, once at the death of a friend (John 11:3–35) and another upon gazing at a soon-to-be destroyed Jerusalem (Luke 19:41), he was brought to tears. Jesus lived in the real world as a real person, showing us the kind of human we are all designed to become.*

This book has two main objectives. First, I want to invite people to truly lean into the tension between pain and hope. Pain is real. Hope is a necessary gift only as long as hurts exist. It serves to keep us going, trusting that the world will be healed and whole one day when God gets God’s way. Pain isn’t going anywhere until that happens. Jesus did not whisk it away, and neither can we. We can take cues from Jesus’s life, teachings, and effect on those around him for how to step into the highs and lows of our own lives. He didn’t shy away from pain. He didn’t allow the risk of pain to keep him from love.

My second goal is to offer a bit of a manifesto on the life and teachings of Jesus, focusing on his *humanity*. I want this to be a book that anyone—including a non-Christian—can pick up and ask, *Who is Jesus, and does he have anything to contribute to my life—especially when everything is falling apart?* The humanity of Jesus, although acknowledged by Christians, seekers, and skeptics alike, often isn’t taken as seriously as the New Testament writers would invite us. I mean, think about it. Jesus was born just like all of us. He went through every phase of life, from infant to grown-up. (Although he never made it to middle age. So, if you have made it past thirty-three, congrats—you beat Jesus at something.) But seriously, Jesus is presented in the Bible as the fully human

* In case you are wondering, I affirm the full divinity of Jesus. I’m a Trinitarian.

one who models being an image bearer perfectly. He is the human that the story of Eve and Adam hoped for. He is the human who enacts what all of us are designed and destined to live. The human who shows us what God would do when faced with the mingled love and pain of life in the real world.

When we look at Jesus, we see what God always wanted for all of us: a life in tune with our Creator, one another, the earth, and our unique selves. Jesus is the image of God (Colossians 1:5–20), showing us simultaneously what God is really like and what truly being human is all about.

The humanity of Jesus is also about his posture in the world. Christ *has humanity* as he steps into the pain of others—just as he did when he bore his own suffering. His humane compassion informed every action and reaction in the Gospels. Of course, limited as he was by time and space, he could be present only to those around him. When he saw that someone was sick, he healed. When someone was overwhelmed by demonic evil, he liberated. When someone was hungry, he multiplied resources for the masses. When enemies bound, whipped, and executed him, he responded with forgiveness rather than vengeance. These individual examples of his compassion, love, and sacrifice show us his deep love for people. He invites his disciples to follow his example, beyond the small bit of real estate he occupied during his three short years of ministry. We can have humanity too.

As I bring these themes together, my goal in *Echoing Hope* is to create a space to explore the life of Jesus through the grid of pain to empower us to step into the challenges of life just like he would. The humanity of Jesus shows us a path through our challenges that ultimately redeems our pain. And here's the thing: we all have pain. This book isn't only for those grieving a recent loss; it's for anyone who lives in a world where pain is real. That's all of us.

There is no doubt in my mind that I come at the topics of pain, hope, and becoming human like Jesus in my own particular way. I'm a white, able-bodied, middle-class, theologically trained pastor, young father, and husband, who is Christian and male. Being human involves so many other perspectives besides

my specific lens, which is shaped by my culture and experiences. This book is not an attempt to capture *everything* it means to become human like Jesus. My hope is that I share my reflections in ways that build bridges toward others with gracious space for our differences and enthusiasm for how the transformation process invites all our stories.

This book is raw at some points. I'm vulnerable about my own hurts. While this is by no means a memoir (nor are my personal stories in any sort of chronological order), I do share moments of both childhood trauma and pain experienced in adulthood. I've tried to be sensitive about each memory shared, as some of what you will read may open up wounds that still need some tender care in your own life. If your trauma still needs to be processed, especially if it pertains to abuse, I encourage you to discern whether to read this book with trusted friends, faith leaders, or counselors. (What I share here will not be overwhelming for most, but it is heavy at times.)

My hope is to challenge readers to hold their pain in light of the life and teachings of Jesus, but I don't want to heap "sorrow upon sorrow" (Philippians 2:27, niv). If you decide to step into the first chapter and beyond, you will discover a Jesus who experiences our despair and invites us to see the beautiful potential of our lives as we discover that resurrection is real and that sometimes our emptiness allows hope to echo all the louder. To help process what you're reading, I've included formation exercises for you to engage as well.

This book is broken up into four parts. Part 1 will explore the kind of world Jesus entered as a human, especially with regard to the human experience of suffering. It will launch us into parts 2 and 3, which take us on a journey through the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), beginning with the birth of Jesus. This will lead us to part 4, which explores the latter part of Jesus's ministry: his agony over the coming destruction of Jerusalem, his arrest, his death, and his resurrection.

Jesus's empty tomb is where the book will begin and end because I am convinced that resurrection is the most human thing

of all—it is a final act of God’s grace that makes a person fully human forever. Only then will we be free of pain. And until then, we look for Jesus when life hurts and try to uncover how to become an echoing hope to the world that he so loves.

Part One

AN ECHOING PAIN

There is no doubt—things in this world aren't as they ought to be.

No matter our experiences, we're invited to step into our broken world with Jesus. Jesus—God become human—offers us a model for how to live in this sort of world. Finding God in a world tattered by evil seems impossible in many circumstances. Rather than explain those experiences away, what if we named the fact that Jesus goes missing once in a while? What if when we admit that we can't see him, we're primed to find him in a new way?



chapter 1

WHERE IS JESUS?

* * *

The problem of pain meets its match in the scandal of grace.

—Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*

Joy and pain aren't enemies. They're companions. The highs and lows of life dance together more often than we'd like to admit. When life graces us with contentment, we may feel enticed to ignore hidden layers of struggle. When stress bombards our momentary happiness, it's as though those gifts that energized us are now elusive, like oil through our fingers. Joy and pain, hope and anguish, stability and disruption—these stand shoulder to shoulder in the real world. As a generally optimistic person, it's taken me years to see that my positive outlook was directly shaped by an insecure childhood. But it wasn't all bad.

In 1994, I was a lanky fourth grader with two front teeth that hardly fit my face and unruly hair that was either styled as a flattop or forced to succumb to Grandma's Wahl clippers. Yet I was a generally cute kid according to most of the pictures.

California's Central Valley was home. Sunshine and outdoor play, rec league sports, playdates (we didn't call them that back then), the churning of Grandpa's homemade ice cream, trampoline dunk contests with uncles and cousins, occasional trips to the mall's toy store, and swimming pools to cool me down—these frequently cultivated joy and grit in me as a child.

My parents divorced when I was a toddler, and in the years after, Mom had primary custody and Dad cared for me every other weekend. Not an ideal arrangement for any child, but hav-

ing both parents in your life—even if not in the same household—is a gift that not all share.

On New Year's Day of my fourth-grade year, Dad remarried and asked me to be his best man. Although we were somewhat deprived of time together, we had a great relationship. At home with Mom, joy and pain coexisted in a more obvious way. With a new boyfriend entering our lives when I was about four, the joy she brought to me as a nurturing mother was intertwined with the pain of abuse. There was fear. There was joy. The greatest blessing during those years were the gifts of a younger brother and sister. Many of my early memories involve us being silly or having adventures together. My brother and sister are six and eight years younger, so being “Bubba” to them was a role I took pride in.*

I'd later learn that my brother and sister didn't show up on our doorstep as gifts from a stork. They were the beautiful gifts that came from a tragic relationship. From about 1989 until 1995, Mom endured an abusive relationship. I doubt it started that way, but I can't recall a time when he felt like a safe presence. With him, my primary emotion was fear. Numerous times, Mom was abused physically and verbally in front of me. I saw it all. I experienced his violence directly at times as well.

One situation shortly after Dad's wedding sticks with me, and it isn't unlike other stories of abuse from those years. I can describe it from the perspective of all five senses because that's how vivid this memory is to me. (Even now as I type, tears are starting to well up.)

Recalling the place and time in my mind, I can *feel* it. The fear sweeping over my body as I lay in my lofted bed as a fourth-grade kiddo. The feeling of being smacked in the face about three times as I lay helpless.

The memory is also something I can *see*. The flash of light—

* My siblings have their own stories. I won't share theirs, except in generalities like this. When I share about Mom, it's only as part of my story and not to carelessly share hers. Mom eventually left the abusive boyfriend, got a restraining order, and moved on. She gave me permission to write these stories down. My desire is to honor my family in every way possible.

although difficult to describe—that seems like it happened milliseconds before the hand impacted my face. The wall of my bedroom that I faced to try to escape the danger. The blurs fading in and out as tears clouded my vision. The window in my room that faced the street, perhaps the next level of escape if I dared try.

I can still *hear* this moment of abuse. The screams of my mom pleading with her boyfriend to stop hitting her and to leave me alone. The shaming yell of being called a bastard. The slamming of a treasured picture frame containing a recent image of me and my dad posing, as groom and best man, for the wedding album. The shredding sound of the photo being ripped into pieces.

The *smell* stays with me as well. The musty scent of an old pillow as I buried my face to protect myself from a possible second wave of violence.

I also *taste* the intensity of this moment. The salty drizzle flowing down my cheeks toward my mouth. The bitter flavor that comes when you've been force-fed an overdose of trauma.

I remember how it ended each time too: with the loud roar of a motorcycle driving away. I was safe, for now.

As much as I have wanted to forget that moment when my mom's long-term boyfriend came home drunk and beat her and smacked me, it lingers. The scars are real. They will always be there, no matter how much the wounds might heal. Pain and joy didn't coexist in that moment. Only pain that echoed in my inner emptiness. My helplessness. Fear. Anger. It was like my home life was a dark cave from which escape was momentary, only to be confined to the darkness again and again. I knew Jesus when I was at church, but did he know me when I was at home? Many times I felt all alone, wondering if my vacant cries for rescue would be answered.

Your Pain Is Real

Where is Jesus when life hurts? Where is the echoing hope that interrupted reality two thousand years ago? Pain reminds us that hope brings a longing for what isn't healed yet. No matter your context in life, you have pain. Challenges in life are inevitable. I've

faced anguishes that look quite different than yours, and vice versa. Comparing pain is like comparing our worst injuries. Both situations leave us with broken bones. Nothing is fixed by such a contrast.

Sometimes we use our pain to compensate for our insecurities (*The reason I'm not like her is because I had this disadvantage and she didn't*) or to boost ourselves up as the underdog (*I had it hard and I'm winning anyway!*). We might minimize our struggles in comparison to the “real issues” of the day (*Well, my struggles really don't matter since there are people in the world who don't have enough food to eat*). Our pain might even attract attention by making others feel bad for us (*My boss is so horrible; look at how he treats me*).

Pain is contextualized by the privileges (or lack thereof) that we are born into, but the truth is that seemingly hopeless circumstances eventually present themselves to us all. Owning our pain (ideally within the context of a supportive community) is the first step toward healing. In my journey, after neglecting my struggles—or rather, after having become as healed from my past wounds as I could be with the spiritual and emotional resources I'd attained up until then—I came to a tipping point. Pain presented as anxiety. I didn't know what to do. Most of my life I have struggled with anxiety, but I'd either muscle through it or ignore it. I couldn't ignore it any longer. I needed help and longed for wholeness. Therapy was the next step.

Looking for Jesus in Pain

In a ten-by-twenty room on the fourth floor of yet another expression of Seattle construction, I confronted insecurities, blind spots, and unhealed wounds. Every other week I opened up to the deeper parts of my story—those wounds that I believed were already miraculously healed but which festered just below the surface of my consciousness. That room proved to be sacred space, where my therapist (who also had training as a spiritual director) mediated God's love for me through just the right mix of invitation and challenge.

In our modern world, the imagination is often dismissed as

childish. What a mistake. I've discovered that it's powerful. In fact, imagination gives us the space we need to reconsider the past, reimagine the future, and reclaim the present. The imagination is a place where we can attune our hearts to the deepest realities of our lives with God.

In our modern world, the imagination is often dismissed as childish. What a mistake. I've discovered that it's powerful.

In the Christian tradition, there's a set of spiritual growth resources that was popularized by Saint Ignatius of Loyola, who founded the Jesuit order. Ignatian contemplation encourages readers to step into a biblical story and imagine the scene. He invited his students to "compose the place" in their imaginations so they could experience the story with Jesus in a deeper way. Sometimes you might find yourself relating to a character in the story; at other times perhaps you are watching from the gathered crowd. But in the imagination, something profoundly real takes place: you can experience Jesus in ways that are experientially more concrete.¹

Another way this devotional practice can be applied is to take a memory from one's life and "compose the place," inviting God to breathe fresh insights into our souls. James Martin, SJ, said, "God may invite you to remember something that consoles or delights you. What is God saying to you through those consoling memories?"² Some use a version of this practice to pray through painful memories.

With this framework, when the time was right, my therapist suggested a spiritual formation exercise. Just like the suggestion to go the gym and exercise, I thought about it long before I ever acted on it. One day when I was at home, during a moment of quiet inspiration, I thought, *Let's give this a go.*

The story of abuse that I shared a bit ago kept coming up as a connection point to many of the challenges I was facing. Could I step into that memory with a contemplative posture to allow its full weightiness to be touched by Jesus? To simplify the process of

prayerfully composing the place, my therapist provided guiding questions: *Where was Jesus in the room when this horrible situation took place? What if you went back into that space and asked Jesus to be real and present to you in that scene—what would you see?*²³

Could I Find Jesus?

The memory I was invited to explore hurts. Even now. To write this chapter, I had to compose the place afresh. For a long time, it was a source of shame for me. That no longer is the driving source of pain. A sense of injustice toward that little boy—me—brings more sadness than should be humanly possible to feel.

The injustice also brings an awareness of other children in the world who face neglect, abuse, slavery, and every other sort of evil imaginable. And then it translates right down to my two precious daughters. My oldest is near the age I was when the abuse started. I can't even . . .

Stepping into deep pain with open eyes is one of the hardest things we can do. As I sat at my townhouse kitchen table listening to the midmorning Seattle traffic buzz by, I centered myself on Jesus. I prayed. I invited the Spirit of God to be present and active so that with Jesus's help I'd see something beautiful in the midst of the pain. I needed hope. I longed for healing. I wanted to know that Jesus was there, even in that dark hour of my story.

Stepping into deep pain with open eyes is one of the hardest things we can do.

As the scene came into my heart and mind, all my senses drew me back to that moment. The place was composed. I began to look for Jesus. Where was he going to be in the room? My beliefs about God include a deep conviction that God is in solidarity with us in our suffering, not distant from it. He had to be in the room. *Fourth-grade Kurt needs you, Jesus!* I couldn't find him. Frustrated, I looked some more. Jesus was nowhere to be found. I wanted more than anything in that moment to see Jesus and to allow him

to bring great healing to this wound. Instead I had to sit in the anxiety and the pain.*

When Jesus Is Missing

The moment when Jesus went missing in the gospel accounts is perplexing. This isn't a surprise to the reader because of the way the author composed these stories. But to the people living within that space and time—people like Mary and her friends, the disciples, and the many others mourning the death of Jesus—despair was real. Jesus was gone for good.

John's version of the story begins in a garden area with tombs. Mary arrived at the garden tomb, and the stone was rolled away (John 20:1). She was already mourning the loss of Jesus; now he was literally lost! Who would do such a thing? Didn't the grave robbers have any respect? Didn't they know who he was?

Mary was persistent. She remained at the garden of tombs (verse 11) on what the text twice tells us was the "first day of the week" (verses 1, 19). She wept, believing that her world was broken and hopeless. Mary's despair seems beyond repair. And to add insult to injury, a random gardener showed up and asked her why she was weeping. She said, "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've put him" (verse 13). The empty tomb's echoes brought a reverberating dread.

Later in the same chapter, we encounter another disciple of Jesus, Thomas. At this point, all the close disciples of Jesus had seen him except for Thomas, who apparently forgot to RSVP to his Evite. This story is so well known that we sometimes label a person a "doubting Thomas." One dictionary says that a doubting Thomas is "a person who refuses to believe without proof; skeptic."⁴ Although this has become a bit of an insult, I think Thomas

* I'll come back to this exercise later on in the book, but for now I want to say that processing a traumatic memory like this is best done in the context of a support group, therapy, or spiritual direction. It took an extended period of personal work before I was ready to step into this version of Ignatian imaginative prayer. I suggest starting with a gospel story rather than negative personal memories.

offers us a profound gift in the story.

Thomas helps us see Jesus's marks on his hands and side as symbols of our own lives (more on that in a bit). After being told by the other disciples, "We've seen the Lord!" Thomas wouldn't have it. He told them he'd believe only if he saw "the nail marks in his hands" and put his "finger in the wounds left by the nails" (verse 25).

Thomas needed to see Jesus's scars. If he could see them—if we can see them—then a great hope might actually be true: *even our pain is redeemable by God*. Thomas wanted to know whether the pain that thrusts itself at us—the grave disappointments—is redeemable by the God he'd come to know in the face of Jesus. Sadly, all this had come into question with Jesus's execution. Thomas desired for the rumors to be true. But desire alone doesn't always lead us to what we hope for. Thomas couldn't find Jesus.

Does Jesus Even Care?

Many times when I looked for Jesus, I couldn't find him. There are few things more frustrating than submitting your life to a God who doesn't want to be found. This is like Mary in John 20. Jesus transformed her existence. She knew pain but in him found hope beyond anything she could dream up on her own. Yet instead of finding Jesus's resting place ready for a fresh bouquet of flowers, she discovered a rolled-away stone. She couldn't take it.

It's the same with Thomas, who wondered if the so-called miracle being described was that his friends got ahold of some more of that "good wine" Jesus had made out of water (2:10). Thomas needed something he could touch and see to assure him that it wasn't all a hoax or a group hallucination. He missed the party. Now Thomas longed to see the scars on Jesus to know that he truly was raised from the dead.

Look at your own story. In a meditative posture, perhaps you can discern your connection with Jesus or what the image of an empty tomb brings up for you. Perhaps you've looked and have yet to find him. You like him as a teacher and guru but not as a

personal expression of the God of the universe. Or could it be that Jesus is real to you but mostly as a belief system? This is true for many Christians I've met.

Maybe Jesus is present to you, but when it comes to your deepest hurts, you haven't been able to pinpoint where he fits into all of it. Like Mary, could you be truly seeking Jesus and feel surprised that he's not where you expect him to be? Like Thomas, do you need something experiential to break through the pain, to remind you that God is still on the move to bring healing and hope?

I needed Jesus to be in the room with fourth-grade Kurt. I needed him, like the disciples claimed to experience, to mysteriously appear with me without needing the front door. I had composed the place and he was nowhere to be found in my moment of great need.

Where is Jesus? I couldn't see him. At least not yet.



FORMATION EXERCISE

When we look around us, we know something isn't right. You may not have any major pain points right now, but we all face challenges in our journeys. When we have seasons when God feels distant, it's natural to wonder if we've done something wrong or even to feel disappointed or angry. Choose one or more of these prompts to take a step forward in engaging your pain with open eyes.

Consider a time in your life when God has seemed absent. Maybe it's a situation you are experiencing right now. Don't try to fix it or reframe it. Simply be honest. See it.

Scripture: Read Psalm 22. What do you notice about how David expressed his dissatisfaction with God's seeming distance?

Reflect: How does this psalm relate to your experience of God's absence?

Journal: How does your experience of God's absence shape your openness to Jesus? Address your questions, challenges, and desires to Jesus honestly in prayer.