

One of the things it's not all that uncommon to do is to try to forget the past. In the movies and in real life for instance, a person might try to not look back on some of the things they've done, preferring to hide them away, or not confront how they've been hurt by what others have done to them. But as we read in today's Gospel, while the resurrection has happened, the wounds of Good Friday are still on the body of the resurrected Christ. However, as we also read while the wounds are there, we also hear in this beautiful Gospel the power of healing and empowerment that comes from God. Jesus comes and meets the apostles where they are at, and then liberates them from their fears and sends them on a mission.

All of us share in this too, for as we all know no matter what our story is, our souls all bear wounds that we have made, and have also been put there for others.

Years ago, Carolyn McKinstry, impacted by the sin of racism, after years of carrying her pain inside, was able to turn that pain around by giving it over to God who helped her find healing.

One day, she sat nervously in the waiting room of a psychologist. Her husband Jerome's plea for her to see a doctor had finally sunk in, yet not even Jerome knew the depth of her misery, how the sadness never went away, no matter how she tried to numb it with alcohol.

These feelings had been a part of her life since she was 14, throughout high school and college, going on 10 years at that point. She kept to herself. Rarely did she talk to other people. She was afraid something terrible would happen if she got too close to anyone, even Jerome her husband, their daughters and other family members. She didn't know where these feelings were coming from. That's what made them so frightening.

She picked up a magazine and flipped through it. The pictures that stared back at her were white smiling faces. Their lives were nothing like hers. She had grown up in Birmingham, Alabama, during the height of the civil rights struggles. Their city had been nicknamed Bombingham, because of all the bombs that had destroyed black homes, churches and businesses.

Her parents had done their best to shelter her brothers, sister and Carolyn. They may have talked with their friends about segregation and racism, but not with the kids. Her dad told them the places they weren't to go, like across the railroad tracks, and insisted her brothers escort her everywhere. She questioned why there were so many rules. But she didn't know to be afraid, not then.

Church was the one place Carolyn was allowed to be on her own. They went to the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church downtown. There, she'd met Cynthia, her best friend. She remembers being baptized at 13. When the pastor lifted her from the water she blinked and looked up into Jesus' tender face in the stained-glass window above the baptismal font. It seemed as if He were telling her, "I'm here, watching over you."

Now, Carolyn wondered if that was true. No matter how she prayed, God hadn't eased her suffering. Lately she slept only a few hours at night. By morning she was exhausted. She picked at her food. She lost a lot of weight. Her hands were always breaking out in rashes. How could she go on like this?

Jerome was constantly asking her, "What's wrong?" But she couldn't put the darkness inside of her into words. They'd been married six years, with two beautiful girls. Why was her head filled with thoughts of death?

Jerome's job had recently transferred the family to Atlanta, Georgia. The only person she'd met was their next-door neighbor. She found herself drinking more and more; vodka each day. A week earlier she'd mixed a mid-morning drink and sat down in front of the TV, just trying to get through another day. The girls were outside playing. A commercial came on: "Are you confused about life? Need someone to talk to?" It seemed to speak directly to her. "Call this number. Counselors are waiting to take your call." Carolyn dialed the number. A woman answered. She was explaining the services they offered when Jerome came in. He'd forgotten some papers he needed for work. "Who are you talking to?" he asked. "It's really early to be drinking."

She told him she was talking with someone from a suicide hotline. "I just wanted someone to talk to," she said. "I was lonely."

"I think you need to see a doctor," he said; Carolyn agreed. She also knew she needed help when she wasn't watching her child play outside who almost got run over by a school bus.

Her doctor referred her to a friend of his. She didn't know initially that the friend was a psychologist. That's how she ended up in a psychologist's waiting room. A door opened next to her. "Mrs. McKinstry," the psychologist said. She wondered what he would ask her. Nobody she knew had ever been to a psychologist.

He led her back to a small office. He was a kindly older man. Carolyn told him she wasn't sleeping, that nothing made her happy. He listened intently, nodding and taking notes. He asked what she did during the day and if she was drinking. Finally his eyes locked on hers. "What you're dealing with is called depression. It's treatable, but you won't survive if you keep on like this. You need to face your feelings.

"I can't help but think there's something, maybe in your past, you need to let go of," he continued gently. "We need to figure out what's bothering you."

Driving home Carolyn heard his words repeat in her mind. What had happened to her, she asked herself? She remembered how happy and carefree she'd been as a child. Where had that girl gone? The fact was, her daddy hadn't been able to shield her from all the violence that had happened in Birmingham when she was 14. Nearly every day she thought about her friends, the girls who'd been killed when their church was bombed. She tried not to dwell on the past, but it was always there.

Carolyn picked up her girls from the neighbor and got them settled playing in their yard. She went into the house, then to a closet where she had a box full of keepsakes. There on the top was an old black Bible. Her parents had given it to her the day I was baptized. She had always carried it to church. She had brought it with her that awful day, September 15, 1963.

It was Youth Sunday. Carolyn was laughing with Cynthia, Denise, Addie and Carole while they primped in front of the restroom mirror. She needed to leave. She was the Sunday School secretary. She had to get her attendance and offering report in by 10:30 A.M. She ran up the stairs. The phone in the church office rang. She held the heavy black receiver up to

her ear. A man's voice said, "Three minutes," then he hung up. What was that about? She remembered she still needed to collect the report from the adult classes. She walked into the sanctuary, toward the stained-glass picture of Jesus.

Boom! The floor swayed. But the sound was muffled. Thunder? Glass fell at her feet. Someone shouted, "Hit the floor!" She dropped, flat on the ground. Silence. Then a stamped of feet. Police sirens. She had to get outside. She looked up. There was a hole in the stained-glass window where Jesus' face had been.

The streets were filled with people screaming and crying. Finally she saw her dad behind a police barricade. They drove home in silence, too scared to say a word. How could anyone bomb a church? She only hoped no one had been hurt.

Late that afternoon their phone rang. Her mom answered it. She was quiet and solemn as she listened to the caller. Then she hung up and turned toward the kids, her face filled with sorrow. "There were four girls in the

restroom who never made it out," she said. They were Carolyn's friends. It felt like her heart had stopped.

"It can't be true," she whispered.

Her mom nodded. "I'm afraid it is," she said. "They died."

Carolyn remembered the strange phone call at the church. Had someone been trying to warn them? Or taunt them? Over the course of the evening—through friends and neighbors, the radio and the evening news—they pieced together what had happened. But each bit of information only left me more stunned and frightened. There were people out there who wanted to kill them. They'd taken her friends from her. Bombed her church. That night in bed she burrowed deep under the covers, but it was hours before she was able to sleep. It seemed there was no place safe anymore. An awful emptiness opened up inside of her.

The next morning her dad made breakfast, like every morning. No one asked, "Carolyn, are you okay? Do you miss your friends? Do you want to talk about what happened?" Back then, there was no grief counseling. Loss

was a part of life and you were supposed to stoically push through it. She went to school on Monday and laid her head on her desk wishing she could block out the sadness, anger and confusion.

Now she knelt on the floor next to her closet. Her body shook with emotions that had simmered inside of her for years. How could someone have bombed God's house? Killed four innocent little girls? What kind of person was capable of such evil? They had caused so many people so much pain. She'd never even gotten to say goodbye to her friends. Her parents asked her if she wanted to go to the funeral. She said no, twice. She wanted to remember them as she had last seen them. But she did want the killers to hurt. She wanted them to feel the same pain that she felt inside.

God, she prayed, I am in so much pain. Please fix my body. Take away my cravings for alcohol. Please touch me with your healing so I can go forward. It happened slowly, but God helped her and she didn't look back.

She picked up her Bible, felt the weight of it in her hands. It fell open. There was an old church bulletin tucked inside. She looked at the date: September 15, 1963, the day of the bombing. She read through the hymn

selections for that fateful morning, read the page numbers and spoke the names of the people who were to give the prayers. Halfway down the page she saw the pastor's sermon title: A Love That Forgives. There was a scripture reference, Luke 23:34. Carolyn flipped to the passage and slowly read the words: Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

Tears streamed down her cheeks. She thought of that stained-glass window, of Jesus reaching out to her. All these years she'd carried this burden inside, without ever once... Forgive me, she prayed, for not coming to you before now, for not trusting you. She tried to see the bombers as God saw them. She wept, thinking of someone so fearful that killing seemed the only option. Forgive them as you have forgiven me she prayed again. Carolyn could feel the hardness in her heart, melting, anger and bitterness flowing out of her. Then the tiniest sensation—one she barely recognized. She ran outside to her girls, held them tight. She wanted to remember what it was like to be young again, carefree, life full of possibility.

Her depression didn't lift overnight. She'd taken only the first step of a long journey. She still had a lot to learn about the healing power of forgiveness. She kept returning to God in prayer and met again with the psychologist.

From that point on she stayed as busy as possible. Every day the girls and Carolyn went bike riding. She bought cookbooks and taught herself to bake. They joined a church and she raised money for a new nursery. She also has made mercy a core part of her identity; re-affirming that forgiveness when she finally saw justice served. In 2002, after almost four decades had passed since the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, AL, Carolyn was served with a witness subpoena in the State of Alabama vs. Bobby Frank Cherry case. Bobby was one of the Klan members involved with the bombing in 1963. During the trial, Carolyn had to relive the painful memories of the past. In the end, Cherry was convicted of four counts of murder and sentenced to life in prison.

By God's grace, Carolyn chose to forgive Bobby Frank Cherry, Robert Chambliss, Thomas Blanton, and George Wallace. Forgiving these men of their actions allowed Carolyn to move forward with the life God had planned for her. Although it has been a long process of forgiveness she says that by his grace she has sincerely forgiven all those who had such a negative impact on her young life. She says God has rewarded her by choosing to forgive. He has given her a ministry of love and reconciliation that would not be possible if bitterness still lived inside her heart.

Slowly she began to see the world with new eyes. She reached out to others, even strangers, listening to them. She believed we're all God's children, and it became real to her—how loving and warm people are, how much we have in common, how it's mainly ignorance that separates us. Later she enrolled in divinity school so she could bring God's message of love, forgiveness and reconciliation to the hearts of all, allowing God to use her—her experiences and voice—to deliver His words.

They moved back to Birmingham in 1978 and again became members of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, where she still is today, that church a national historical landmark. Here, every day visitors come from around the world to remember and reflect on the pivotal moments that changed a nation. They come to see the place, to physically touch it and spiritually connect with it. The church holds a special status in the history of the civil rights movement. It remains a symbol of faith and hope for all who enter its doors. For Carolyn, she says it will always be a reminder of God's infinite grace and love for all his children, and how we are given that love in order to forgive what seems unforgivable and release our burdens to Him.

“Peace.” Its the word Jesus says when He meets the apostles in the locked room, coming where they are, perhaps a bit like Carolyn, afraid. Afraid of the mob who killed Jesus. But perhaps afraid of what they have done or failed to do the past few days. And much like Carolyn looking at the stained glass window of our Lord, what they experience, and what she experienced gradually, was that peace as well, realizing that mercy and love were far more powerful than evil and sin. The challenge for us, as Carolyn came to realize on her own journey out of the darkness, is to open our eyes to God who wants to give us peace, by seeking it out, by giving it, and proclaiming it to the world.

As a starting point, we need to acknowledge our pain and what wounds we have on our souls. Jesus says “peace,” but then shows the wounds to the apostles. Sometimes like Carolyn we try to bury the past and not talk about it as her family did in the days after the bombing. But other times we are tempted to think I have no sin at all and am overall pretty good, so that’s good enough. The wounds are a reminder both of how we are hurt by others, but also a reflection of how as humans we can be petty, greedy, self-absorbed, envious and sinful in many ways. Jesus bears our wounds. But the healthy conscience isn’t one that wallows in shame, but

acknowledges these things, and turns them over to God. And then comes the peace. As we see in the image of our Lord depicted in Sister Fuastin Kowalska's vision, who was a simple Polish nun, she wrote in her diaries the revelations she had about God's mercy, which is the antidote to self-hate and sin. The message is summed up as God loves us more than we hate ourselves. Blessed Francis Xavier Seelos, a German priest who became a missionary to the United States in the 19th century, said "no one was ever lost because his sin was too great, but because his trust was too small." God's mercy is greater than our sins, so we should approach the Lord with trust, knowing He meets us where we are at and his mercy is freely given.

The second step though is to be merciful to others. We seek forgiveness, but in turn forgive others. This is hard, but it's not an option for the Christian; for as we say words our Savior gave us, "as we forgive those who trespass against us." Mercy is how our humanity is restored and how we can communicate Christ's goodness to others. As Carolyn found out, she was burdened with the pain of what she had been through, but also with the hate for the bomber. But when she prayed and she says had that hate flow out, her heart changed. We should not be naive and think this is

easy; many of us myself included have a hard time forgetting wrongs done to us. But when we pray for God's help to forgive; when we think of Jesus saying "forgive them," or when we reach out to those who have wronged us and even pray for those who have died who have wronged us, we can do so much towards changing two souls for the better, ours and the person with whom we are having a difficult time.

Third, being transformed by mercy we are sent. Thomas the apostle gets a bad reputation as the "doubter" but he is understandably dejected so not with the others when Jesus appears, who see the wounds first too. Jesus tells Thomas to touch his hands and side and doubt no longer; he does and then has the bold proclamation of faith, "My Lord and my God." But then he goes and proclaims the Gospel and becomes a martyr. Carolyn experienced liberation from mercy, but then went to school, became a national speaker and writer, and worked to be an agent of mercy in the world and make it known through word and action. When we forgive, when we are present to others, when we show kindness, we do the same thing.

You might see the words "Jesus, I trust in you" frequently on images of the vision that Sister Faustina saw of Jesus to convey divine mercy. That trust

is so important; trusting like Carolyn did looking at Jesus. We need to trust that God loves us no matter what. That His mercy are so powerful. The evil one, the devil, will do all he can to make us think we are unloved, or to give up on the world or ourselves. God though created you and me and He loves us more than we can ever imagine. When we admit our mistakes, seek forgiveness and forgive in return, love can do so much to transform. So when we get down on ourselves or others or the world, may our eyes be opened to the reality - the reality of sin as seen in the wounds, and the powerful reality of God taking those wounds on Himself through His love which is there to set us free. Wounds will always be there on our souls, and new ones will be created as our lives go on. But rather than cover them up, let us turn them over to our Lord knowing He truly will set us free and give us comfort and peace through His infinite love and mercy.