

2nd Sunday of Easter (Year A)

John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, '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, I will not believe.'

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

I preached on this passage last summer as it was one of the texts in our Unraveled series from A Sanctified Art. In that sermon, I focused primarily on the importance of doubt in the life of faith. This text, commonly and unfortunately referred to as "Doubting Thomas" has been used throughout the years to shame doubt. Millennia of interpretation have taught some of us that doubt is incompatible with a strong faith. That's nonsense. In my experience and in my observation, the persons I've known with the greatest faiths are those who have left room for doubt and questions. Doubt doesn't weaken faith; it strengthens it. Or, at least, that's this one pastor's professional opinion.

But today, I'd like to approach this text from a different angle. Rather than focusing on the importance of doubt in the life of faith, I'd like to talk about the importance of physical touch in the life of faith.

Our faith is an incarnate one, a physical one, a tangible one. Remember, Jesus didn't just come to us in the spirit; he came to us in the flesh. Remember a few months ago when we gathered on Christmas Eve and I gave a sermon with a rather detailed and messy account of Jesus' birth. Jesus was born through the same messy, agonizing, and beautiful birth that each of us was born by.

Jesus used physical touch often throughout his ministry. He touched people no one else would touch. Remember the lepers? Remember the woman who had been bleeding for years? Remember the blind persons, the beggars, and the other marginalized folks? Jesus knew that appropriate and healthy physical touch is an important part to the life of ministry.

Appropriate and healthy touch is an indispensable part of ministry. However, it must also be acknowledged that just as appropriate and healthy touch is healing, inappropriate and abusive touch can and is equally hurtful. We who are the Church must always be critically aware of the difference between the two. But as long as we are respectful of other folks' personal boundaries, physical touch is an important way that we build relationships and care for one another.

Which is why now is such a difficult time for so many of us. It's now been over a month since this global pandemic reached the Commonwealth. It's been more than a month since we've been able to gather physically to worship. It's been more than a month since we've been able to touch anyone other than the folks we're living with, if indeed we have anyone that lives with us. It's been more than a month and we're beginning to feel the physical isolation.

And, you know what, that's ok. We're literally hardwired for physical contact. One of the things I've learned in my birthing class by Dan and Rebecca Dekker is just how crucial it is for a newborn baby to have skin-to-skin contact with the mother immediately after birth. According to an article Rebecca wrote a few years ago, evidence suggests that immediate skin-to-skin contact between babies and their mothers leads to more effective breastfeeding, a beneficial rise in blood sugar, and more stable heart rate, breathing, and oxygen levels than with babies who do not have the benefit of skin-to-skin contact.¹

But the evidence is not just biological, it's also innately known.

There's a beauty to physical touch. There's a beauty to consensual sex between adults. There's a beauty to holding the hand of your 90 year-old grandmother. There's a beauty to placing my hand on my wife's stomach and feeling my daughter kick and wiggle. There's a beauty to hugging a dear friend after being separated for far too long. There's a beauty to all these things.

And it's a terrible feeling when those things are taken from us.

Thomas knew what that felt like. He knew what it was like to have a beloved friend taken from him.

Last week, we celebrated the beginning of the Season of Easter. And today, we continue this fifty day season of resurrection. Today's story is one that comes to us each year on the Sunday after Easter Day. Jesus had appeared to the disciples after he appeared to Mary and Peter at the tomb. The disciples were hunkered down in an upper room when Jesus appeared to them. But someone was missing; Thomas wasn't there. We don't know why he wasn't there. Maybe he was the designated person to go to Kroger to get groceries, I don't know! But for whatever reason, he just wasn't there. He wasn't in the room where it happened.

But when Thomas did finally get to meet the risen Christ, he just had to touch him. Physical touch was just what he needed in order for it to be real to him. And you know what? I don't blame him one bit. If I were him, I would have acted *exactly* the same way. And I think most of us probably would as well.

¹<https://evidencebasedbirth.com/the-evidence-for-skin-to-skin-care-after-a-cesarean/>

For two thousand years, we've shamed Thomas. We've labeled him as "Doubting Thomas," which I think is the real shame. Because right now, in the midst of this pandemic, we are all hungering for physical touch. Some of us are lucky enough to have people with us to hold during this time. But there are some among us who live by themselves who are really hungering for physical contact. Yes, we can Zoom together. Yes, we can call on the phone. Yes, we can talk to each other from a socially safe distance. But it's just not the same.

If you have it in front of you, I'll invite you to look upon the sculpture that's on the front of your bulletin. It's a depiction in a chapel in Germany of Thomas and Jesus. Jesus tall and straight, sturdy and solemn. Thomas, however, is bent as if his body has been weighed down with grief. His eyes gaze up in wonder as his arms cling to Jesus shoulders, almost as if he's collapsing into the arms of his beloved friend.

I think that sculpture describes better than words can just how desperate Thomas was to touch his friend.

And I think that's a beautiful thing.

I think Jesus invited Thomas to touch him because Jesus knew that physical contact is an important part of resurrection, of faith, of the ministry that we do with one another as the *Body* of Christ. I hope today that you see a bit of yourself in Thomas. And I hope that once this is over, whenever that will be, we might have a new appreciation and curiosity for the ways that appropriate and healthy touch can make the love of God known to us and to our community.

In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God's children, say: **Amen.**