

The world lost a faithful and holy man this past week, as Pope Francis died. Regardless of one's religious affiliation, I believe the Pope was widely respected for his humility, wisdom, and compassion. Just two weeks into his papacy, back in March of 2013, I was profoundly moved by something Pope Francis did. He assumed his role early in March, and Maundy Thursday fell towards the end of March. On Maundy Thursday, making a very intentional statement about his understanding of Christ, Pope Francis washed, dried, and actually kissed the feet of two incarcerated young women, one of whom was Muslim. Pope Francis horrified some by this act, as typically such papal foot washing would only be done on Christian males, preferably within the Vatican compound. By leaving the compound, consorting with convicts, and especially, by touching the feet of a young, Moslem woman, the Pope upset some people. He also delighted other people, including me. That simple act of the Pope's touch made an impactful statement around the world, moving some to joy and angering others.....and that the impact was so great demonstrated something that most of us already recognize: touch is powerful.

While the Pope's foot washing on that Maundy Thursday a dozen years ago recalls Jesus washing his disciples' feet at the Last Supper, it is also evocative of all the other times that touching happened in the Scriptures, including times that involved feet. And remember, feet that walked all day in sandals on dirt roads in ancient Israel were dirty, calloused feet. But do you recall the Scripture text we had several weeks ago, when Mary of Bethany poured ointment over Jesus' feet, in gratitude for his raising of her brother, Lazarus, from the dead? More than feet are touched upon in Scripture stories, of course. Remember all the times that Jesus touches people in his ministry of teaching, healing, and just being with people? He holds the children who come to be blessed in his arms. He heals a blind man by rubbing spit in his eyes. He lifts up a young girl thought to be dead with a touch of his hand. The woman who had been hemorrhaging for decades was healed when she touched the edge of his robe when he walked past. Touch is powerful. Especially the touch of God.

We all know this instinctively; it's why we put an arm around the shoulder of a discouraged friend or reach for the hand of a family member lying ill in a hospital bed. It's why we cradle and gently jiggle crying infants in our arms and why care facilities now often have dogs or cats present, so that residents may pet them. Touch is healing, affirming, and life-giving, maybe in a way that few other things can match. Which may explain some aspects of our Gospel story this morning.

Last Sunday was Easter, of course, and we witnessed the resurrection of Christ through our encounter with the empty tomb. Recall that the women who discovered the empty tomb and were given a message of resurrection by two angelic figures did indeed run and share that message with the other disciples. But recall also, that the others did not believe them and considered their words to be nothing but an idle tale. It was a confused, troubled, and fearful band of disciples that gathered on that first Easter evening of which we read in our text today. Hoping against hope that this crazy rumor of resurrection might be true; doubting that it really could be true; and above all, fearful—fearful of what yet lay ahead for them, the known associates of this recently executed Jesus. So it is behind *locked doors* that they gather together once night has fallen, fearing for their own safety. To these less-than-heroic followers, the risen Lord appears. He wishes them peace, then he shows them something tangible: his hands and his side, presumably healed and yet scarred from the crucifixion. He understands that it is in experiencing that which they can *touch*, as well as *see*, that the disciples' doubts and fears will be dispelled. He then breathes on them the Spirit of God and bids them to practice forgiveness. They will, in fact, leave this locked room and head out to change the world, because of this encounter. It is the *tangible* nature of Christ's presence that makes an impact of this scared, muddled crew, turning them from cowering victims into courageous witnesses.

As we all know, since we read this text every year on this Sunday following Easter Sunday, one of the disciples missed out on this faith-shaping, life-changing experience. The apostle Thomas. For reasons unknown, he wasn't present. Many of *us* have learned over time, to our regret, that if we miss a meeting, we may well be elected in our absence to some responsibility or position, and so we are very careful not to miss a meeting.

Evidently Thomas hadn't learned this yet. And the position which was conferred upon him in his absence, in a sense, was that of the doubter and the skeptic.

Yes, the other disciples assured Thomas that Jesus had appeared to them in see-able, touch-able form. But, that didn't do the trick for Thomas. In the same way that the women who first saw the empty tomb were easily dismissed by the disciples as being a little loopy, now these same disciples are easily dismissed by Thomas as likewise being a little loopy. Maybe he reasoned that this fearful, grief crazed group had shared way too much wine among them and essentially had some kind of group hallucination. Whatever his reasoning, Thomas is not convinced. And so he becomes a spokesperson for skeptic and doubters in every time and place, very likely including some of us at some times and in some places, when he says: "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." So, Thomas has two requirements for the overcoming of his doubt: He wants to see the risen but scarred Christ, and even more, he wants *to touch* him. He wants to feel the scars, lay his hands on this risen Lord, and know that his other senses are not deceiving him. Because although we claim that "seeing is believing", it might be more accurate to say, "touching is believing". As we already have been reflecting, few things are as powerful as touch.

So, this is what Thomas wants and needs to overcome his doubt, and Thomas is one fortunate disciple, because he receives what he wants and needs. When the disciples meet again on the evening of the following Sunday, Thomas wisely elects to be among them. And Jesus again appears among them and wishes them peace. He then turns to Thomas and says, "See what you need to see. Touch what you need to touch. Including my wounds and scars. And then move beyond your doubt to belief." Being able to see and touch his risen Lord does in fact overcome Thomas' doubts, and he makes a spontaneous confession of faith when he cries out, "My Lord and my God!" Quite a dramatic contrast to his claim just the previous week: "I will not believe." This tangible encounter with the risen Christ moves Thomas from doubt and fear to faith and courage.

How do we know that Thomas, and the others, experienced a transition from doubt to fear *to* faith and courage? We know it quite simply by our very presence here this morning and the continued existence of the Christian church and faith 2000 years after the events recorded in this Gospel lesson. Had the disciples remained behind their locked doors, paralyzed by fear and doubt, there would be no Christian faith or church, no followers of Jesus around the world of every ethnicity and nationality, for two millennium to this very day. The only reason the faith we cherish was born and has endured is because those first witnesses and followers of Jesus unlocked the doors and left their safe space. So, let's reflect on locked doors for a moment, ok? Because locked doors are a powerful metaphor.

It was only 5 years ago that all of us experienced the Easter event behind shut and locked doors; we were in lockdown as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Anything that lay beyond our locked doors was a source of fear. We feared getting infected; we feared becoming ill, maybe even dying; we feared each other as sources of infection. We were afraid to leave our locked room. Yet this past Sunday, just 5 years later, we celebrated Easter with a packed church and jubilant worship service. That's a transformation right there that could cause a person to believe in resurrection!

5 years ago, as we cowered behind locked doors, we knew what we feared. Let's think now about what might keep us behind locked doors in this present time and place. What do we fear now beyond our locked doors? What keeps us anxious and paralyzed and wanting to hide away in safety? This is obviously a highly personal and individual question, and our answers would likewise be personal and individual. Many may be fearful of our national and international political situation. Others may be fearful of the economic instability that exists. Some are fearful of where their own health is heading. Others fear the breakdown of treasured relationships. There are those who fear environmental calamities. Since I will be retiring, maybe many of us here have some fears about future unknowns for our congregation. It's not difficult to comprehend reasons for being afraid to unlock our shut doors and venture out of our safe space. We understand the disciples in our lesson today all too well.

Here's the remarkable and encouraging reality though---in spite of the shut and locked doors, Jesus enters the room. A locked door does not prevent God in Christ from being present with those who are fearful and doubting. Which isn't really surprising, is it? If a sealed tomb couldn't keep our Risen Lord *in*, neither can a mere locked door keep our Risen Lord *out*! Whatever fears and doubts assail us, however tightly we shut and lock the door, Christ still enters to meet up with us where we are, and that is a grace and a comfort. We can't lock God out. Which means God always has access to look to offer us forgiveness, peace, and hope. And surprisingly often, God may do so in a tangible way, as was the case for Thomas and these others, becoming the wounded Christ for us Who is not only present, but touchable.

So, how do *we* make such a transition from doubt and fear to faith and courage? As these first followers did? How do we encounter a tangible risen Christ? How do we touch God? Or anything or anyone so vast, abstract and powerful as God?

I don't suppose it will hardly astound anyone that as a Pastor, I am going to propose that we experience the tangibility of God in the sacraments of our church--Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. As you no doubt recall from confirmation years, a sacrament bears God's grace, is associated with a verbal promise of God, and is tangible---as in touchable. Like Jesus was touchable in this locked room in our lesson. We have witnessed three Holy Baptisms in the past two weeks. Baptism is tangible; we touch and are touched by the water of Holy Baptism. We will receive Holy Communion this morning as we do every Sunday. Communion is tangible; we touch and are touched by the bread and wine of Holy Communion. This very morning, you will touch and be touched by the Risen Christ as you receive the sacrament. That's why we advocate the practice of Holy Baptism and why we commune together as often as possible---we are touching and being touched by God in these sacraments; we are experiencing the Risen Christ in a tangible way. And touch is powerful; especially the touch of God. That touch can turn us from doubting and fearful folk into faithful and courageous witnesses.

We also experience the tangibility of God *outside* these church walls, of course. Tasting freshly grown food, exchanging loving gestures with others, listening to bird song or the wind in the trees, seeing the first

greening of grass or buds appearing, all are ways God's grace is tangible for us. If we recognize God's presence within them, they become sacramental for us in that way, a way that God touches us and changes us.

But wait, there's more. Luther urges all of us to be "little Christs" for one another and the world. Which could be another way of saying that we can become sacramental for one *another*; we can be the tangible way that God holds the hand of another or brushes away a tear or embraces someone in joy. And they can do the same for us. Not only do we receive the grace of God in sacrament; we can *become* the sacramental *means* of God's grace for someone else. Which is a reason to get out of bed in the morning and face another day; we can be both the recipients and givers of the grace of God. If we want to see the risen Christ, maybe we should look at the face next to us in the pew. Or the frightened face of the struggling. If we want to touch the risen Christ, maybe we should go and hold the hand of someone in need of touch in the nursing home. Or hug our lonely neighbor. Or wash someone's dirty feet. If Christ could do so; if the Pope could do so, surely we could, too. Touch is powerful; God's touch and even our own. How will you be touched by God today? How will you touch someone else with the grace of God today? Thanks be to God who comes into our locked rooms, touches us, and opens the door. Amen.