

“Reach Out and Touch”
(1 Peter 1: 3-9; John 20: 19-31)

On the church’s liturgical calendar, Easter isn’t just an event that happened on the one day when Jesus arose from the grave. No – Easter is a “season” that lasts until Pentecost Sunday, which this year is acknowledged on Sunday, May 28th. In fact, a former mentor of mine was fond of saying that “We are an Easter people.” which means, I think, that as Christians, we celebrate Easter, new life and salvation won by Jesus Christ on the cross each and every day of our lives!

This sermon is titled, “Reach Out and Touch.” And you can probably guess why. It’s because Jesus invited Thomas to touch him where the nails and the spear had pierced him, in order that Thomas might believe that Jesus was truly resurrected from the dead. It’s a fantastic tale – and one, I think, that demonstrates the love and the grace that God has for us, even when we doubt.

In this instance, Jesus “seems” to rebuke Thomas for not believing the testimony of the other disciples because he says, “*Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*” (John 20:29) Over the years I’ve heard quite a few people use Thomas as a negative example, of one whose faith was weak, but I think that we should examine this statement from Jesus in light of the *entire* passage.

You see, looking at scripture just one verse at a time is not all that helpful for interpretation because, as I learned in Seminary, CONTEXT is extremely important. This means that, when trying to uncover the meaning within a verse, it’s best to read the verses that appear before it and after it, and to think about the placement of the passage in light of the larger story being told. When we do this, it gives us an opportunity to try to find the

main point in the passage – and sometimes that process reveals to us concepts or “nuggets of truth” that we wouldn’t otherwise have noticed.

So – with this interesting statement that Jesus makes to Thomas, I am struck by the fact that, even though Jesus seems to be rebuking him, he probably isn’t. Why? Because Jesus’ actions indicate otherwise. Jesus’ actions are very far from “rebuke.” I think that Jesus, knowing that Thomas has missed out on something very important, takes the time to return once again to the Upper Room when Thomas is sure to be there. And Jesus lovingly (I believe) offers Thomas the opportunity to do exactly what he had asked for: to place his hands where the nails had held Jesus to the cross, and to touch the place where the spear had struck him. That, it appears to me, is a very loving thing for Jesus to do: to return for the benefit of just one follower...

This, I think, indicates just how important it is to Jesus that Thomas truly “gets it,” that he truly understands that Jesus has risen from the dead and that he is indeed alive and ever-present with his followers. Jesus says 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.”* (John 20:27)

Now why am I talking about “reaching out and touching” when we’ve just come out of an extended time when we weren’t supposed to be within 6 feet of one another? Well, there are all kinds of ways to reach out and touch others, aren’t there? We can do it in many creative and imaginative ways, even if not physically. We can reach out through prayer. We can reach out through the example of how we live by faith in God. We can reach out using many kinds of communication: writing a note or letter, calling on the phone, sending an email, using some kind of video call platform like Zoom or Skype or FaceTime, or using emojis in our communications to signify love and “virtual” hugs. Whatever works

face the dangers and challenges in the world that they would surely meet as they traveled around, witnessing and testifying to what God was doing through the Son, Jesus Christ.

Jesus cared so very much for his followers, and he cared about each one of them individually. And that's another thing that I believe this biblical story demonstrates. Just like the story of the "Lost Sheep," where Jesus describes the Shepherd leaving the 99 to search for the one that was lost in order to reunite it with the flock, so Jesus returns to the Upper Room for the one disciple that hadn't been present the first time he appeared to them. What a loving and gracious thing for Jesus to do!

You know, a lot of people come down really hard on Thomas, giving him the label "Doubting Thomas" and talking about how he didn't believe, but I remember reading earlier in this gospel that the disciples had a hard time believing and understanding Mary, too, when she told them that Jesus was no longer in the tomb, but was alive. Amen? I'm sure they weren't **certain** that Jesus was alive when Mary ran to tell them he had arisen. In fact, scripture says that they didn't believe. In fact, only Peter and John ran to the tomb to check on it. No, it wasn't until he appeared to them, in person, in the Upper Room, that the group of disciples believed Mary's testimony. So why should we give Thomas such a bum rap when he, also, finds *their* fantastic story hard to believe until he sees Jesus with *his* own eyes?

You know, once you start to look for it, you can find people being judgmental not only in the world around us today, but even all those years ago and throughout the scriptures. But, friends, Jesus taught over and over again that God is gracious and merciful. And over and over again, Jesus showed us and encouraged us not to be judgmental toward others. "*Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.*"

(John 8:7) “You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.” (Matthew 7:5) And, finally – “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly father will also forgive you;...” (Matthew 6:14)

A few years ago when I was researching what I might say in a Children’s sermon about this narrative, I came across a children’s message online that focused a great deal on the fact that Thomas wasn’t in the Upper Room when Jesus appeared the first time. The writer of the children’s message told the children that it was all Thomas’ own fault that he missed Jesus the first time, because he wasn’t where Jesus had told him to be. He implied that Thomas was disobedient and irresponsible. This baffled me, because scripture doesn’t say anything to indicate that God or Jesus had judged Thomas harshly for being absent that day. In fact, all that the scripture tells us is that Thomas wasn’t there. He could have been absent for any number of very valid reasons. Right? And so, of course, I felt disappointed in whomever wrote that children’s message and vowed not to treat Thomas “unfairly” in my comments about him in the future.

Friends, the Good News of this Gospel Story is that Jesus appeared to ALL of the disciples, even if not at the exact same moment, and Jesus encouraged them to “reach out and touch” him, just as Jesus had often “reached out and touched” them. **This, then, is what Jesus’ followers are called to do: to reach out and touch the lives of others with their faith, with their testimony, with love, with compassion, with grace, and with all that Jesus had taught them.**

I’d like to close with some words from Winnie Varghese. She writes: *“Thomas’s is the story for the ones who make their own way, those who cannot inherit religion but*

who will struggle to figure out what is true for themselves. Many of us that remain on this journey have had a personal encounter with the holy that is at the heart of our journey as Christians. Faith, even if lifelong and the tradition of our ancestors, is realized in each of us through some personal experience, mystical or ordinary. Thomas illustrates this truth. Although many of us do rely on the teachings and experience of church tradition, we are all dependent on a personal, deep knowing or a commitment or persistence in questioning that brings us to communities of faith. Thomas has become the sign to the church of the individuality of the journey of faith, even as it is rooted in tradition and occurs within a community...

...Whether we are lifelong Christians, new to the faith, or still exploring from the edges, Jesus invites us all to reach out and touch him, as Thomas did. There is no judgment for asking questions or for needing a little more convincing than someone else. We are all on the journey together, sharing our stories as we grow closer to one another and to Jesus.”¹

Dear friends – today it is my hope and prayer for each of you that you will determine to go out into the world with the knowledge that Jesus has reached out to you and because of that, as you walk through life, you will be willing to reach out to others, however that may be appropriate in the moment. Amen.

“Now, to Jesus Christ, who loves us and freed us from our sins by His blood and made us to be a kingdom, priests of His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

¹ Varghese, Winnie. *A Preacher’s Guide to LECTIONARY SERMON SERIES: THEMATIC PLANS FOR YEARS A, B, AND C* (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2016), pp. 32-33.