

### **“The Power Of Touch”**

In the name of our risen Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace.

The disciple Thomas, who is always the focus of our gospel reading on the Second Sunday of Easter used to shock me. I agreed with Luther that “the stupidity of Thomas was astonishing and monstrous...he was not only obstinate, but also proud and contemptuous in his treatment of Christ.” To be called a Doubting Thomas would have been at one time, a soul-shaking insult to my faith.

All atheists, agnostics and garden variety doubters used to shock me. I had a visceral, self-righteous reaction to books like “The God Delusion.” I thought I needed to provide a leak proof defense for the faith or serve up spiritual bromides to calm the discomfort in my own mind, even if they failed to resolve the questions in someone else’s mind.

But doubt doesn’t shock me anymore at all. If you have listened to me over the years, you know that. I’m as good an agnostic as anybody. Even the great reformer, John Calvin, acknowledged that the story of Thomas is in John’s Gospel to show that doubt is common to all of us. Honest doubt is not a contradiction of faith but an essential quality in a healthy, growing relationship with God. I’ve discovered what Jewish Rabbi Daniel Polish called “the valuable service disbelief can render.”

What continues to surprise me is not Thomas’ doubt but the evidence for belief that the risen Christ offers. I’m stunned by the way Jesus “showed them his hands and his side.” I’m shaken by his invitation to touch the wounds. I am shocked by his scars. I can deal with doubt, but these ugly marks of human suffering on the body of the risen Christ blow me away.

There are times when I wish I had a different story, times when I would prefer a resurrection in which the power of God massaged away those ghastly reminders of human suffering and pain. There are times when I would prefer a Jesus whose divinity overrules his humanity – a spiritual being who is not wounded the way I am.

As a child of a certain era, I’ve had moments when I wished that the risen Christ were a divine Superman, “faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound.” I’ve imagined Jesus to be “a strange visitor from a distant planet with power and abilities far beyond those of mortal men” who, “disguised as Clark Kent fights the never ending battle for truth and justice.” In a more generationally appropriate image, I’ve also imagined Jesus to be the divine aviator who enters another world to save its inhabitants from destruction.

That may be the Jesus I want, but the Jesus I get in the Gospel is recognized by his scars.

More times than I care to count, over my life as a pastor, I have been with people who are dying for all sorts of reasons, more often than not, congestive heart or cancer. More often than not, as life seeps out of these people’s bodies, I would have liked to promise a Christ who would wipe away the brutal signs of human suffering and death. But all I could offer was the Jesus with scars.

Together we descended into the valley of the shadow of death and as we did we claimed the promise of the God who in Christ descended into the hell of human suffering through which we were walking. We faced the darkness with the assurance that Jesus is no superhuman High Priest but he himself shared fully in all our experience. That’s all I have to offer to someone who is suffering, who is dying. And in some strange way, it is enough.

Those shocking scars were enough for the disciples on that first Easter evening. They were enough to help Thomas overcome his doubt and to awaken his faith. But are they enough for those “who have not seen

and yet come to believe?”

Stunned by Jesus’ scars, I am also intrigued by the possibility that the nail-scarred Christ meets us when we touch the scars of the wounded places in our own lives. In his book “Subversive Spirituality,” pastor and theologian, Eugene Peterson says the wound is meant to be “a listening post, a chance to exit the small confines of a self-defined world and enter the spaciousness of a God-defined world.”

Do you remember the book “The Shack,” very popular years ago? I confess that literary snobbishness and theological prejudice kept me from reading “The Shack.” I am skeptical of overnight sensations and I detest pop religious novels. But I was struck when I read an interview in which author William Young called “the shack” a metaphor for a human heart that has been scarred by abuse and pain. It’s the house where we hide our wounds the way the character Mac in the novel tries to hide “the great sadness “ in his life. Young calls the book a fictional narrative of his own spiritual journey. When he opened the door of his shack, he discovered the all-embracing love of the triune God who had been there all the time.

Jean Vanier, founder of L’Arche communities for people with developmental disabilities around the world, we have one just down St. David St., discovered the presence of the risen Christ when he was stricken with an infection that left him as weak and dependent as the people he served. He learned that we should not hide from the wounded parts of our lives. He writes: “There we will touch a lot of pain. We will possibly touch a lot of loneliness and anguish. Then we will hear something deeper. We will hear the voice of Jesus say, “I love you. You are precious in my eyes.”

My brothers and sisters in Christ. Perhaps Jesus’ invitation to Thomas to touch the scars on his body is the invitation to each of us to experience the presence of Christ by touching the scars in our own lives. There is no doubt about it. That would be shocking. But in the end, also very healing. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.