

## **The Touch of Thomas**

*March 30, 2008*

(Easter 2 - Year A)

John 20:19-31

*St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas*

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

*The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!*

Last week, I was working in my office and a woman called me on the phone.

She was someone whom I didn't know who needed financial assistance. I asked her if she could come by the church, so that I could meet her. In about an hour - this woman arrived at the church office.

I introduced myself to this woman - then asked her if she wanted some financial assistance.

She said:

“Well, yes, but actually what I really want is someone to pray with.”

So, we went into my office and then sat down.

Immediately after we sat down, this woman grabbed my hand and began to cry.

So, I began to pray for her.

However, the whole time that we prayed, she kept holding onto my arm, as if my arm was the only thing that was holding her up.

After I had finished my prayer with her, I looked up at her face.

Then my eyes began to water up, because I knew, in my heart, that this lonely woman's touch on my arm - was the touch of Jesus.

In the Gospel of John, the apostle Thomas misses out on the risen Jesus' appearance on Easter night.

Yet one week after Easter Day, Thomas is there.

And Jesus invites Thomas to touch him.

Jesus says to Thomas:  
“Put your finger here.  
Reach out your hand and put it into my side.  
Do not doubt but believe.”

The power of touch was very important in my encounter with that woman whom I prayed with in my office.  
And the power of touch was very important in Thomas’ encounter with the risen Jesus.

I have been an Episcopalian all my life.  
And I am old enough to remember when the 1979 Book of Common Prayer first came out, which replaced the old 1928 Prayer Book. Several things in the newer prayer book caused conflict and controversy. And, one of the things in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer that caused a great deal of controversy, was the Passing of the Peace.

The Passing of the Peace had been added to the 1979 Prayer Book. The Passing of the Peace is that part of the service where I say to you: “The peace of the Lord be always with you.”  
And you all reply:  
“And also with you.”  
Then, we all exchange greetings of Christ’s Peace, with words and with the shaking of hands or with an embrace.

This part of the liturgy is certainly biblical.  
In fact, in today’s Gospel reading from John, the first greeting out of the risen Jesus’ mouth to the disciples is:  
“Peace be with you.”

Yet, in the mid-1970s, the idea of saying:  
“Peace be with you” - and then actually saying something to someone else - in church - was disturbing to some folks.  
During this controversy, I can remember some of my parents’ friends saying:  
“I come to church to worship God, but I certainly don’t want anyone *touching* me.”

Eventually, most everyone got off their high horses  
And realized that Episcopalians actually speaking to each other, shaking  
hands, or God forbid, hugging each other, was not harmful to our  
health.

As a matter of fact, I believe that the re-introduction of touch back into  
our worship made us realize why we come to church in the first  
place.

If you want to worship God by yourself, then stay at home.  
But, if you want to worship God in community, then come here to this  
church, where you *will* be touched.

For I know, for a fact, that there are some people in this church today -  
that the only time that they are lovingly touched - is during that  
Passing of the Peace.

You see, Jesus knew the power of touch.  
He touched people's eyes and ears and bodies to heal them.  
He touched little children and held them in his arms.  
He touched dirty feet and he washed them.  
And, he invited Thomas to touch his resurrected body, with fingers and  
hands.

As part of my training as a Summer Camp Director at Camp Allen each  
summer, we are given a list of different types of touch, touch that  
is appropriate and touch that is inappropriate.  
Yet, focusing on those types of touch that are appropriate, good touch  
can be life-giving and affirming.

As a young boy, I can remember my Grandad teaching me how to shake  
hands like a gentleman.

He would say:

“Boy, you need to look eye to eye with the other man, then, take his  
hand, not like a dead fish, but with a firm grip.”

And, even as a young boy, receiving a firm handshake from my Grandad  
made me feel valued and worthy and equal in his sight.

For the touch of a handshake, especially from a colleague, or from my

bishop, makes me feel valued and appreciated.

And you all know that I enjoy a good hug.

A hug makes you feel like you are loved for who you are,

A hug can lift up your whole day and put a smile on your face.

For, hugs and firm handshakes and all forms of good touch are sacramental.

Touch is sacramental in that God takes this very human gesture and God's inward grace shows forth - showing that we are loved and valued for who we are, made in God's image.

In fact, if you look at some of the sacraments that we celebrate in the church, touch is a part of all of them:

In the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, in the communion service, we exchange the peace and we touch each other.

Also, one of the directions in the communion liturgy is that I am always to touch the bread and the cup of wine during the prayer of blessing over the bread and wine.

In the sacrament of Baptism, we touch the people being baptized, with water and with oil.

In the sacrament of Marriage, the man and the woman touch as they take their partner's hand and then speak their vows.

In the sacrament of Healing, the person is touched and oil is put on their heads.

In the sacraments of Confirmation and Ordination, the bishop touches heads, during the laying on of hands.

Touch is a part of our sacramental life,

A part of our life together as Christians.

In this next week, I invite you to touch others.

Give a firm handshake to someone for a job well-done.

Put your hand on someone's shoulder who needs to be encouraged.

Hold the hand of someone who is lonely or in pain.

Hug someone who needs to smile.

And, if you are alone, come to this church, where you can be assured that at least once a week on Sundays, you will be touched with love and peace.

For one week after Easter Day, Jesus appeared to his friends, saying: "Peace be with you."

Then, he invited his friend, Thomas, to touch him with his finger. He invited Thomas to reach out his hand and to touch his side.

And today, one week after Easter Day, the risen Jesus invites *us* to touch his body, to touch his community,  
By reaching out our fingers and our hands and our arms - to touch the world.

AMEN.

© The Rev. Jeff W. Fisher, 2008