

April 19, 2020 - Second Sunday of Easter
Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist, Aptos, CA
The Rev. Tracy J. Wells Miller, Rector

The way I've read the story of Thomas in the past is making me really sad today. For many years now, I've read this story with an emphasis on physical touch.

Thomas says he won't believe until he can touch Jesus, and when Jesus appears to him, he gives him the opportunity to do just that: "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."

I've preached before that Jesus offers us two very tangible ways we can "touch his body" to alleviate our own doubts – by touching the bread of the Eucharist and by touching our neighbors around us in church when we exchange the peace. The Eucharistic bread is the body of Christ and we, the church, are the body of Christ. We may not be able to touch Jesus's actual resurrected body as Thomas could, but we can touch the body of Christ in communion and in our neighbor.

But right now, we can't. We can't touch the bread of communion, and we can't touch our neighbor. That makes me really sad, and it makes all the shortcomings of virtual worship painfully obvious.

Since the shelter in place order was issued on March 16, I have been so grateful for the technology that has allowed us to connect with one another online over the past month – to continue to worship together, to find solace through the power of music, to see one another's faces, and to share meals together while physically apart. These experiences have brought joy to my soul.

But there is so much we can't do while physically apart. We can't share the bread and wine of communion. We can't shake hands and hug one another. We can't share a meal. (We can watch one another eat our own meals at home, but we can't enjoy food that others have brought to share with us.) We can't sing together.

Despite all the things technology can do for us, it can't replicate the experience of holding someone's hand or tasting a casserole at coffee hour or blending our voice with someone else's in song in real-time (without the annoying lag over the internet or garbled audio of slow bandwidth).

Many of us have been living in these almost entirely virtual worlds with some people we love for a long time. Because I have moved around so much over the past 20 years, nearly all my close personal relationships outside of my marriage are experienced virtually: my friends, my sister and niece, my parents – I experience all these people primarily through FaceTime, phone calls, and texts. I know that for many of you, children and grandchildren are experienced primarily this way as well.

Somehow, those virtual relationships were bearable when we had other in-person relationships in our lives. I might not be able to get hugs from my niece as often as I would like, but I get hugs from the kids at church. I might not see my biological family in person very much, but I see my church family in person daily. But now that ALL of our relationships must be electronic, when we have to interact that way even with the people we live in the same town with, it exposes what a poor substitute they are for the real thing. Seeing your faces on Zoom helps, but it's not the same thing as shaking hands or hugging. Seeing the candles burning on the Wednesday night Taize services is not the same as striking a match and lighting one yourself.

During this time of physical distancing, it seems a cruel truth of nature that those things that are most imbued with the sacred are those things that simply MUST be physical. Without physical touch and physical presence, most of our human interactions eventually become empty and hollow.

As I reflected on the story of Thomas, I couldn't get away from this idea that the remedy for Thomas's doubts was physical touch... until one commentator on the scripture pointed out that the scripture does not

actually say that Thomas touched Jesus. Jesus invites him to do so, but after his verbal invitation to touch his wounds, Thomas immediately responds, “My Lord and my God!” Nowhere does it say that Thomas took Jesus up on his offer to touch his wounds.

Thomas believed not because he physically touched Jesus, but because he experienced Jesus – because Jesus came to him even through the locked doors of fear.

This year, the message I most need to hear from the story of Thomas is not that Jesus offered Thomas the opportunity to physically touch him, but that Jesus came to the disciples even when they were locked up in their rooms, isolated and away from others because of fear. This year, the words “blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” take on new meaning for me. Blessed are we who are not able to touch Jesus or one another and yet still continue to believe.

In this earthly life, physical touch is incredibly important. It is that way by design. God created us as physical, embodied beings, and then became one of us to show us that the physical is itself sacred.

At the same time, however, this earthly life is not the pinnacle of existence. There is another plane of existence that transcends all physical space and time, a plane of existence where the resurrected Christ moves in and out of walls and locked doors, a plane of existence where Jesus is present to us always.

Perhaps in this time of physical distance from other human beings, we might shift our focus to that plane of existence, remembering that even when we are physically separated from each other, we are never separated from Jesus. This times of physical distance from other people may open us to a new depth of relationship with Christ. In the words of Helen Howarth Lemmel’s famous hymn, if we

“Turn [our] eyes upon Jesus [and]
[l]ook full in his wonderful face[,]
the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of his glory and grace.”