

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, Easter 2, Psalm 133, 1 John 1:1-2:2, John 20:19-31
(Elizabeth Felicetti)

Last year on the second Sunday of Easter, we were not able to meet here in person, so I preached about Thomas to a camera. We weren't able to have communion. It was the day before my big lung cancer surgery and I preached about skepticism, and how we need skeptics.

This year, on this second Sunday of Easter, I'm grateful to be in a room with many of you—maybe not “many,” but many more than last year, even though we are wearing these masks and staying apart. I'm grateful that we have communion. I'm grateful that many of us are vaccinated. I'm heartbroken that we lost a member a week ago to this horrible disease. I have hope that next Easter will be a lot more like 2019 than 2020, with a Great Vigil of Easter that starts out on the labyrinth with incense and an Easter egg hunt with children looking for eggs with candy in them hidden around the grounds instead of driving through, even though that was actually pretty great. But I want kids to be able to grab those colorful eggs in their little hands again, to touch the eggs that they hunt instead of pointing at them through a car window.

I'm struck by how the sense of touch permeates our Bible readings today. I can feel the oil running from the head to the beard in Psalm 133, even though I don't have a beard. I am trying to remember the last time I anointed someone with oil, which I used to do regularly. Some of you used to anoint each other here every third Sunday. The first Sunday we were shut down was one of those third Sundays when we used to have healing prayers with unction. Days before Sheri Blume had asked about how we were going to change our anointing practices given the potential pandemic, and I think I made a joke, but then was shocked that we were shut down days later because being around each other, touching each other, breathing on each other, was suddenly so dangerous.

The change happened so fast. One Sunday we could touch and the next Sunday most of us weren't even allowed in the building.

One day, the disciples were locked in, afraid, because Jesus was dead and their dreams died with him and they had no idea what to do next; and then Jesus was suddenly among them. The changed happened so fast that they couldn't believe it. He was there, breathing on them--something that definitely doesn't happen in our masked days.

One important aside: the Gospel of John reads that the disciples were locked in “for fear of the Jews.” Remember that those disciples were Jews themselves, like Jesus. The word “Jews” in this context has been used to justify horrible antisemitism for thousands of years. Jesus was a threat to institutional authorities in his days, including many religious leaders and also the Roman government. At the time the Gospel of John was written, there had been a schism among Jewish people who did and didn't follow Jesus, and the book was written with those bad feelings in mind. Always remember that Jesus himself was a Jew, and that the Gospel of John addresses Jewish people problematically. We have to be aware of this history when we read these stories, and not blame Jewish people today for the way a few Jewish religious leaders treated our beloved Jewish Jesus.

Back to all of the touching in today's readings. The first verse of first John says "What we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life." This epistle sounds more like a sermon than a letter. It lacks the customary greetings of most epistles, launching into a declaration of what the writer has heard and seen and *touched*. "Touched with our hands."

In the past year, the knuckles on my hands have become dry and cracked from using so much hand sanitizer. I touch a lot less than I used to, and when I do open a door I immediately douse my hands in sanitizer or wash them for twenty seconds with soap and water. I wonder if I will ever feel safe shaking hands again. I really don't know.

But I do know that touch is powerful. I see that in people who are grieving and notice it about myself when I am grieving: sometimes a touch can bring us to tears even when we say we are fine; and sometimes a touch is supremely irritating or unwelcome when we are vulnerable. Touch is powerful and must be used with caution and respect.

The importance of touch was emphasized to me while writing this sermon. I got stuck exactly here, and Pepper, who comes with me to the office on Thursdays to help me write sermons, came up for some affection. Or maybe she could tell I was stuck. Pepper understands a few words, like "no"—at least she understand that word when Gary says it—and she knows the words "treat" and "walk" and "church"; but touch, not words, touch is a primary way Pepper and I communicate. And touching Pepper, petting her, especially this last crazy year, has been a huge stress relief for me.

Thomas said about Jesus, "unless I put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." Then Jesus said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side."

Our Gospel doesn't say that Thomas took Jesus up on this. As soon as Jesus finished speaking, Thomas said "My Lord and my God!"

The writer of first John wrote, "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life." The writer went on to seek fellowship with others in Jesus.

We have been trying to figure out fellowship without touching. I'm grateful that the church building is slowly opening back up. A few members of the sewing group met masked and far apart in the parish hall on Thursday, and while they can't touch each other, I thought about them touching the pieces that they are working on. I thought about all the hands and prayers that went into the quilts that group worked on that now we are raffling. We also had three different people working to beautify our grounds on Thursday, and I thought about what it means to put your hands in the dirt, the earth. Gary does all of the yardwork at our house so if I try to wax on about gardening he will torment me when I get home—I get away with a lot less when he shows up and listens to my sermons—but I do feel closer to God when I have my hands in the earth. I think about God creating Adam out of the dust. When I plant something, I feel like I am creating. I feel connected. Touch connects us.

When we can't touch each other, we can still touch other things that draw us closer to Christ. That help us to proclaim the good news of God in Christ.

I love these inclusive bulletins that we started to use because we couldn't share books during the pandemic, and we are going to keep using them, but I miss the feel of the prayer books.

What are other ways that you connect to God through touch?

Some of us use books. Some use rosaries. Some use finger labyrinths. Before COVID, some stuck their fingers in the holy water stoup every week, but we can't have water in there at this time. Still: take your bulletin home and ruminate on these readings and think of ways that you can incorporate touch into your faith practice even though we can't touch each other right now.