

First-Hand Knowledge

John 20:24-31

April 26, 2020 – First Congregational Church of Meredith, New Hampshire

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John 20:24-31: But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So, the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said 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.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

I love to be able to see you all by Zoom every week. It is such a comfort when we must be apart. My eyes crave the shapes of your faces, and I delight to see your smiles.

I love the sound of your voices, too. This week in Bible study, I could see everyone’s face on the screen except Carol Euler’s. She appeared to be just a black rectangle with her name written at the bottom. But then she laughed, and our conversation stopped, because we were all so glad to hear her voice.

Seeing and hearing go a long way toward bridging the distance between us these days, but I have to tell you, I miss touch. I miss holding hands as we pray together. I miss anointing foreheads with delicately scented oil. I miss standing shoulder to shoulder with the choir. I miss touch.

Newborns bond to their mothers through touch. Lying skin-to-skin on their mother's chest immediately after delivery, babies come to trust the love and care they will receive in that relationship. When little children scrape their knees, they want a hug more than a bandage. Bedtime stories are lovelier when they are accompanied by a gentle pat or a tousled head before sleep. We share something of ourselves through our hands. Touch reminds us that we are really, physically present with one another.

And so, we all feel a special sorrow for families who cannot be with loved ones in the hospital just now, who cannot hold their hand or gently stroke their cheek, who want with all their hearts to comfort with a simple touch, to wipe a tear or a brow, and who cannot be near enough to do that.

Our skin carries memories for us. It remembers the touch of a loved one, the pleasure of a first kiss, or the pain of an injury. Scars are the most obvious examples of this, places where a hurt is healed, perhaps, but not forgotten. We carry past traumas in our whole bodies, not just in our minds. And sometimes, our bodies will insist that we remember those traumas, even when our minds would rather forget.

Often when we read today's scripture about Thomas, we feel a little superior to him. Even Jesus says that we are blessed because we believe without having seen Jesus in person. But I think we, who have been told not to touch for a while, should not look down on Thomas. Instead, we should have some fellow-feeling for the disciple whose hands missed the touch of his friend, who would not believe Jesus was risen until he felt the wounds in his hands and his

side. These days we know how much our hands would tell us if we could only let them, so we should appreciate Thomas's insistence.

For him, hearing that Jesus was risen was not enough. Even seeing Jesus in the room would not suffice. Only his hands could convince him. Only "first-hand" knowledge would do. Thomas needed to know with his own hands that Jesus was well and truly present, physically present, even after the cross, even after the grave.

Thomas wanted not just to hold Jesus' hand or touch his cheek or stand shoulder-to-shoulder with him, but to feel the scars from Jesus' brutal death. He needed to know that the one who appeared before him, the one who was risen from the dead, was truly the same one who had suffered, that he still carried in his resurrected body the memory of his own suffering.

Jesus' death was still vivid and painful to Thomas, who had only watched it from afar. And he needed to know that the physical memory of that awful death was not something Jesus would simply put aside in his resurrected self. Thomas needed to know that Jesus' skin had not forgotten the cross, because Thomas himself could not forget it.

Paul tells us that our resurrected bodies will not be like our earthly bodies, and scripture shows us that after the Resurrection, Jesus appears in ways that are sometimes recognizable as his old self and sometimes not. Mary Magdalene needed to hear the voice of her friend and teacher, so Jesus appeared to her on Easter morning as a gardener, but she recognized his voice when he called her by name. It was that voice that she carried in her heart.

On the road to Emmaus, Jesus' followers did not recognize him at all, until they invited him in for dinner and watched him breaking bread. Something about the way he broke the bread had spoken to their hearts before, and so their hearts recognized it again.

It was Jesus' suffering that had spoken to Thomas's heart, and so Jesus came to him as the suffering servant, the one crucified, with scars that Thomas could feel for himself.

Today, we live by faith and not by sight. Nevertheless, we are here because, like Thomas, we have some first-hand knowledge of the risen Christ, Christ who has come to us in the way that our own heart could recognize. And so, I ask each of us, how do we know that Christ is present with us? How do our hearts know to recognize him? What evidence is so indisputable to us that we are ready to say, "My Lord and my God"?

I know Christ through my grandmother's firm and unwavering conviction that I belong to God. That is a deep and certain knowledge that I will always carry in my heart. And I see Christ's presence in loving relationships here in this church. My heart hears Christ in beautiful music, sung to honor him. I feel his sacred presence in the sensual experience of bread and cup. What about you? How do you recognize him in your life?

We are the gathered Body of Christ in this world. When we treat one another with love and care, we honor his presence. When we reach out to the world to care for others in his name, then he is there in ways that others may also recognize.

Thomas needed to feel the physical presence of Christ's body, to touch the wounds of his suffering, in order to believe. Others may need to taste the food we donate to the food pantry or wear the protective masks that we sew or open the envelope that contains the card with our good wishes. We can't just be theoretically present for others, we have to give them something to touch, something that they need, something their heart will recognize, in order to be the presence of Christ for them. And sometimes we need to show them our wounds in order for them to see Christ in us.

In the 16th century, St. Teresa of Avila famously said, "Christ has no Body now but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which He looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good. Yours are the hands with which He blesses all the world."

It is an awesome responsibility to be the Body of Christ today, to be the imperfect, wounded, broken body of the living Christ. Yet we are the ones he has called to this task, and the world is crying out for his touch. May our hearts always recognize that cry and share Christ's love with all who seek it.

Amen