

“Hands-on Faith”

Sermon on Sunday, April 24, 2022

Dear church,

Faith sometimes has the air of theoretical stuff. It can be so full of philosophical, idealistic language that it goes over everyone’s head. Big words, such as grace, unconditional love, salvation, redemption, are part of the vocabulary that you may hear in church and liturgy. But how applicable is it when you go back to the office or into a room full school children or to your computer desk, ready for another round of six zoom meetings in a row? At times faith is up in the air while we have to make a living down on earth, and on some days that means simply surviving, getting through it all, doing the best we can with little sleep. Therefore, Thomas is an important Apostle because of his hands-on (no BS) faith. He is not easily convinced by the ethereal proclamations floating around in the air around Easter, the grandiose hopes. He doesn’t drink the kool-aid. “If Jesus is alive,” he says, “if it is really true, I need to touch him and feel his hands and feet. It’s the only way you’ll get me to believe.”

As I contemplated this familiar story, I wondered: are there some parts of our faith that we can put our hands on - or is it all in our heads? I sometimes touch flowers, trees and the soil in my garden, not just because I tend to them but because they tend to me and my soul just the same. I am reminded of the very sensual nature of God’s creation when I’m out there: form, smell, natural beauty and also the dying branches that need to be pruned each year. Some people carry a cross around their neck that they can touch at special moments; it gives them strength. Saint Francis was known to have been transformed when he touched a leper and his diseased skin; his life and faith was hands-on from that moment on. The people in our Social Ministry Team know that working for others, with others, hands-on help does not leave you empty; you are in touch with Christ when you are in touch with one of his brothers and sisters in need. Our hands may come to believe before our heads have caught up with it. Thomas teaches us to trust our fingers. As a person who has a tendency to “live in my head,” I need to remember that.

There is another important characteristic of Thomas the disciple: the courage to express a different opinion in a crowd that is sold on the majority belief; the courage to question and ask for validation. It's actually a very Lutheran trait. Our spiritual father Martin struggled with his doubts and kept them under wraps for a long time, suppressing them, which made him sick in body and soul. When he finally found the courage to say what disturbed him in the church and challenge the majority opinion, when he named the big elephants in the room, it cost him, but it also healed him. I take this Easter story as an encouragement for people in the church and elsewhere to express their doubts in the face of Jesus and whoever represents him. No honest doubt should ever be unwelcomed in this sacred place. Only an insecure church feels the need to excommunicate those who don't subscribe to the orthodoxy of the time. A church that is secure in their faith and in their attachment to Christ can easily take that; it's not even a problem. In fact, we may need Thomas more than the other ten disciples, because he helps us validate what we believe by questioning and he encourages us literally to stay in touch with Christ.

There is an interesting conclusion to this gospel story, and I am not sure most people notice it. When Jesus returns a week later and takes up Thomas on his bold proclamation, Thomas' hands are strangely uninvolved. "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe," Jesus says. And Thomas responds, "My Lord and my God!" So did he actually put his fingers into Jesus' scars and into his side? Did he actually make contact with the wounds of the crucified Lord? John doesn't tell us and it doesn't sound like he did, does it? Apparently what he saw was enough and he uttered the word that would become the orthodox belief of the church, "My Lord and my God." A few centuries later, bishops would fight over the divinity of Christ. Was Jesus human? Was Jesus God? And they started to fight over it and excommunicate one another. The only good that came out of it was the Nicene Creed which we will use today, a creed that embraces the paradox nature of Christ as fully human and touchable and fully divine at the same time.

I find it fascinating that one of the main beliefs of the Christian faith was first expressed by someone who questioned it at the very core. And then, after he said, "My Lord and

my God,” people turned around and said, Now we have to believe in the divinity of Christ or else...” People have this nasty tendency to push their beliefs on others with force and try the impossible: nailing down Christ. The Romans tried that and he escaped from the tomb. The people after Easter tried that and he disappeared as fast as he had entered into their locked rooms. We can't nail down Christ. When we say he is merely human, he comes through our walls and meets us in impossible places. When we say he is merely divine, he eats with us. In all of that, the paradox at the center of our faith must be pondered, touched, respected and it doesn't need to be explained so much. In a few minutes we will open these silly little communion kits and we will touch Christ with our tongues. You can question that, but know that this is the stiff of Apostle Thomas. “My Lord and my God!” Amen.