



The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC
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TOUCH AND SEE

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Luke 24.36-48

While the disciples were talking about the resurrection, Jesus himself stood among, greeting them by saying "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence.

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations. You are witnesses of these things.

On the heels of last Sunday's account of doubting Thomas, admired for his honesty more than criticized for his sin of doubting as Joe told us in his excellent sermon, comes this rather strange passage of other disciples being frightened out of their wits by this ghostly Jesus, appearing like a magician out of nowhere—poof—and there he is. He might just as well have said "boo" for all the terrified trembling that it produced in those standing there. But he said "Peace be with you." Even so, it must have taken them a little while to calm down. Perhaps he offered them a little communion wine to sooth their nerves while he noshed on his fish. He sensed their disbelief and offered them a hand to touch, as he did Thomas, so they could see that he was flesh and blood, reincarnated into some human form that they both recognized and didn't recognize. "Touch and see," was the invitation as he stretched out his arm, a handshake as it were, or perhaps it was a "high five" so they could both *see* that he was human even as they *touched* him. Touch and see.

Then he reminded them of what he had said before his death, that everything written in the Law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms would be fulfilled in him. This is one of those sentences that is easily passed over in a cursory reading of this story as if it was so much filler to make a story. But it has enormous implications for understanding this "show and tell, touch and see" Jesus who is so often misunderstood.

There are three events in Jewish history which became paradigms for understanding Jesus in the early church. They are mentioned in this passage in reference to Moses and the prophets. The first is the story of the Exodus, the most important historical event that shaped Jewish religious life. It is a story of God's rescue from bondage, a story of liberation from oppression, of a journey away from fear and slavery to one of freedom and the Promised Land. The early church embraced Jesus as the new Moses who pointed the way to the reign of God where bondage and oppression have no place in human societies.

The other story that is a close second in importance in Israel's history is that of the exile and the return to the homeland. Four hundred years before Jesus's time, Jerusalem had been sacked, the temple destroyed and the people forced into exile in Babylon as refugees. It was a life once more of oppression and powerlessness, of victimization and isolation from all that was familiar and comforting. Jesus reminded the disciples that his mission was to point to a God who would lead them out of spiritual exile from all the demons deep inside their bones into a life of peace, a God who would be the very peace they sought even in the midst of their exile. "Peace be with you," he said to them as they were shivering in their boots.

The third paradigm comes not from Jewish history but from Jewish religious life in the temple worship where animal sacrifices were offered in a symbolic way by the high priest on behalf of the people to remind them of the God who delivered them from bondage and brought them home after their exile. Jesus is the model of what it means to overcome the powers of oppression and live in peace. But the understanding of Jesus as the sacrifice who saved us from our sin wasn't part of the church's teaching for the first thousand years of its history. Seeing Jesus's death on the cross to save us from our sins, seeing ourselves as sinners in need of someone to set us right with God, didn't influence the church until the early 11th century, when Anselm, the Archbishop of Canterbury made a prominent theological focus.

Unfortunately, this view of Jesus has so taken center stage it tends to be the one and **only** way of understanding Jesus's purpose today. It is being used to condemn rather than edify, paradoxically thrusting the God who rescues us from exile and oppression into the very role of oppressor. This image of God in its extreme expression makes God a judgmental, punitive God who requires payment of us for something we had no part in. I don't believe we were born sinners nor do we need someone to die to save us. And frankly, I don't want to follow a God who creates a world of sinful people then kills his son to set it right and requires that I accept it, or else. This is not the central story of the good news Jesus models for us.

The whole of Jesus's life points to a God who leads us out of the bondage, if not politically then out of the dark night of our soul. He points to a God who made a new covenant based on love not performance, on forgiveness not revenge, on joy not creed, on remedial not punitive judgment. He made his point with stories of a God who, as a loving father, forgives the prodigal son even after a lifetime of debauched living. He tells of a God who forgives the woman caught in adultery when the law would allow others to stone her to death. He points the way to a God who will lead them in an exodus from the oppressive "oughts" and "shoulds" into a land where joy, not religious doctrine, is the order of the day. He leads by example the way to a God who walks with us through our exile into pain and grief and death and then delivers us up on the other side. He points the way to a God who forgives sins and wrongdoing without the least expectation of any response on our part. This is good news. This is the Jesus the disciples, and ultimately the church, learned to follow. This is a Jesus I can follow, for here, even death is denied its power to imprison and exile.

When Jesus met the disciples in this little conclave Luke describes, calmly asking for a bite of fish while they nearly faint for having seen a ghost, he didn't ask them if they believed he died on the cross to save them from their sin. He simply asked them to touch and see, to experience for themselves. He didn't ask them to sign on to someone else's systematic theology of his life and death. He asked them to experience his peace, his presence; touch and see. Then he asked them—and us—to go out into the world to see him in all human forms, every person we met, and touch them as though touching him. We might not recognize him at times, for he might be reincarnated as someone frighteningly different from ourselves. He said that whenever we do any loving thing to any human being in his name, we are doing it as if to him in the flesh. Touch and see; an experience, a relationship found in human encounter.

Isaac Villegas relates a learning moment while teaching a class in a prison. Over and over he heard the incarcerated men talk about which officers and staff in the prison would and wouldn't shake hands with them. A handshake, which harkened back to the days when weapons were often concealed behind the back with the right hand, meant an empty, and therefore friendly, hand. Over the years it became a sign of respect, of mutuality. In this prison, Villegas observed, a handshake was a symbol of the one thing that the prisoners and the guards shared in common, namely their human flesh. A handshake means eye contact, for who shakes hands without looking at the other? It was the new chaplain who had just started that week who was garnering their appreciation, because he looked them in the eye and shook their wounded hands. See and touch. Touch and see. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of all grace and love, whose mercy is ever faithful, who is our refuge and strength in trouble, visit us this day with your peace and with the remembrance of our blessings.

Give us hope that is made wise by experience and is undaunted by disappointment and fear. Bestow upon us a view of the future that frames all of our tomorrows with that peace that passes human understanding. Help us remember that Christ's power was greatest when he was weak, and that in our own weakness is a holy strength.

We are immersed in the troubles of our world, confronted each day with the news that people are being killed because of, or for lack of, religious faith. We are bombarded by the treachery of humanity's inhumanity in the name of political correctness, religious belief or a display of power and might. We feel helpless to change the world. Even so, make us aware of our ability to make changes in our little corner of the world. We can assist those who are hungry; we can cheer those who are sad; we can contribute to the safety and camaraderie of our communities; we can befriend the lonely, the sick, the mentally and physically challenged. Ground us in our own sense of hope in all that is good and beautiful and peaceful.

To that end, open our eyes to see the blessings given to us, large and small: food, sleep, family, church, community and the beauty of spring flowers bursting from the once-frozen and cold soil. Give us the ability to get beyond our own trivial cares to touch the unseen power found in friendships and the holy force that inspires the birds to sing, the trees to blossom and bear fruit, the wind to blow, the sun to shine by day and the moon to reflect the sun by night.

And having touched something holy in this place today, send us forth into a new week refreshed and renewed, with gladsome mind, joyful spirit and peaceful heart to be the body of Christ wherever we find ourselves. In the spirit of the one who loves and empowers, Amen.