

“Touch, Believe, Tend”
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Acts 5:27-32
John 20:19-31

The church has entered the Season of Easter, a time when our celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ continues and scripture testifies to stories of Jesus’ life that pressed beyond death. In some churches, because the Sunday after the high drama of Easter Sunday can feel a bit low energy, they hold Holy Humor Sunday on this day, taking it as a chance to laugh at God’s remarkable and surprising power to defeat the powers of death and domination. Believe it or not, there are some pastors who do whole comedy routines on this day, and liturgy filled with jokes. I fantasize about having my own comedy routine about the church— believe me, you people give me TONS of material to work with— but I just don’t have it in me today.

I can’t muster much humor because I come to you today as a grieving friend. Right after this worship service, I will head with my family to Westchester, where I will preside over a funeral service for my good friend Tara, who died suddenly after she collapsed after running. For unexplainable reasons, her heart just gave out on her, at 44 years old. We were stunned beyond words when we heard the news Wednesday. Tara was just at my daughter’s birthday party. In December, she gathered among our group of friends when we held our annual Friendsgiving celebration. She leaves behind a wife, and daughters who are 6 and 8 years old.

And so, I want to share with you the deep longing with which I read today’s Gospel story. I feel closer to imagining what the disciples felt after the trauma of losing their close, dear friend. I can imagine how they huddled together, like I will huddle together with our circle of close friends in a couple of hours, searching together for words of comfort and peace.

How I wish that our friend could just breeze through the walls, as Jesus came and stood among the disciples even though they stood behind closed doors. Unlike Thomas, who was primed for doubt, I am primed for faith. I’m fresh off of Easter Sunday; I was just rejoicing in the resurrection, so if I got a text saying that Tara’s death was just an awful misunderstanding, and that she’s actually going to be walking through walls, joining us soon for a reunion and a meal, I would believe that in an instant. That veil between life and death still feels thin for me, and I would eagerly welcome the chance for someone to remove it, without question.

But that is not what Thomas did. For reasons scripture did not make clear, he missed the first time Jesus appeared to the disciples in that locked room. Note that the gospel describes the rest of the disciples as hiding in a locked room because they were afraid. So if Thomas wasn’t with the group initially, I wonder, does that mean that he wasn’t afraid? Was he going about his business because he was not ruled by fear? It also occurs to me that while Jesus announced to the disciples, “Peace be with you,” and then breathed on them, saying “Receive the Holy Spirit”–

clearly they weren't concerned about COVID— Thomas was *not* part of that group. He did not get breathed upon, that we see recorded.

When Thomas showed up, they announced to him, "We have seen the Lord" but he dismissed them, saying, "Unless I see the mark of the nails on his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." We give Thomas a hard time, naming him throughout history as "Doubting Thomas," but the truth is that he wasn't asking for much more than what Jesus offered to the disciples the first time he appeared to them in that room, when Jesus showed them his hands and his side. The questions Thomas asked lead to answers we all long to hear, see, and touch.

There's a leader in our church who is one of our most helpful members. This person is on a few committees. But one thing I have noticed is, whenever I charge forth with an idea in our church, the person has what seems like *a million* questions. At first, I thought those questions were resistance. However, over time I have realized the questions are really trying to put flesh on the idea, and make it more concrete. This questioning disciple has actually helped me over time as a pastor to slow down, and to make sure that other people understand and are on board before we begin any process. Even though it keeps me from charging ahead, whatever movement I do make becomes so much richer because of the broad understanding this church member has asked that I form. You see, questioners strengthen the body of Christ.

Maybe Thomas demanded to see Jesus' wounds because he knew just how holy it would be if God could show up with wounds. I come to you as a pastor charged with messages of good news, but the truth is that I have my scars. A seminary professor once taught us to preach from our scars, not our wounds. But the truth is, as we share our lives in our community together, sometimes you may catch a glimpse of a wound that has not yet healed. What has been resurrected in me with my friend's death is the profound awareness of how fragile life is; a fragility that awakened with past deaths of loved ones, and now stirred anew.

I do think Thomas received the Holy Spirit. It may be like that time when we were ordaining elders and deacons, and I forgot to call Ellen, who was to become a new Elder, to the kneeling bench for the prayer of the Holy Spirit. Halfway through the prayer I realized my mistake and called Ellen to get over there and kneel. She did, and I have no doubt that the Holy Spirit still moved on her, even though she was late to the prayer by no fault of her own.

Jesus transfers the Holy Spirit with his breath, and this reminds me of the breath of God, also translated as wind, that hovered over the earth at the beginning of creation, when nothing was yet formed. From that breath, God spoke, and the world was called into order. Sun and moon. Night and day. Water and land. All kinds of vegetation. Creatures of the air and sea. Creatures of the land. Humankind, made in God's own image. God saw all this and called it good.

However, we have interrupted the rhythms of God's creation. Not only that, we have caused its very wounds.

But earth can also teach us something about resurrection.

The Red Wolf was declared extinct to the wild in 1980, due to hunting by humans and destruction of their natural habitat. But through a government program, a few remaining red wolves were bred in captivity, and released into the wild. Their numbers started to rise. But a policy shift in 2016 allowed people to once again hunt and kill the wolves. Their population declined, again— to just 8 in the wild. More recently, they moved back into protected status, and were helped by a wolf pack that had been bred in captivity, released to the wild. Just over the weekend, environmentalists made a hopeful discovery: nestled into a root system of a tree, a litter of 6 red wolf pups— the first to be born in the wild since 2018. You see, if we are able to see the wounds in the earth, and tend to them, we might get rewarded with signs of resurrection.

I was hiking yesterday in Flat Rock Brook Park, with the Haines-Walker family. Among the towering trees around us, some had fallen and were in varying states of decay. Some had fallen and formed bridges across the creek that the children with us would probably have attempted crossing, if not for their parents calling them back. One fallen tree, probably with the help of some industrious beavers, formed a bit of a dam in the creek, changing the depth of the water and creating a new neighborhood in the ecosystem around them, where animals could breed and feed. Some trees, still standing, you could tell have a story. A tall, narrow tree with a huge bulge in its bark 20 feet up bore witness to a year when there had been disease, or a lightning strike. But despite this wound, the tree kept growing, insistently toward the sun, a sign of creation's remarkable resilience. The other thing that was healing about that walk is that it was the first time our two families had seen each other since we had received the tragic news of our mutual friend Tara's death. So, our walk began with hugs and heavy sighing, and children's questions that are too hard to answer.

Perhaps the forest heard our sighs, and offered something back to help our breath. An oasis of oxygen in a neighborhood entwined with highways. That restorative breath reminds me of how Jesus breathed on the disciples, and said, "Peace be with you. Receive the Holy Spirit." It turns out, the hike was something we really needed, something that tended to our wounds. By the end of the hike, the children were leading us on goofy dance moves we had to take across each bridge on the trail, as the adults followed and sometimes led. The pain was still there. It's still there. But beauty is, too.

Jesus' resurrection appearance as someone still bearing wounds teaches us to pay attention: pay attention to our own wounds, and those of one another, with tender care. Pay attention to the earth's wounds, for these are a reflection of God's woundedness, too. Jesus did not come back with a new and improved body. His wounds were not fixed. But by the power of the Spirit, the wounds teach us that there can be beauty, resilience, and life, too.