Second Sunday of Easter, C

Old St. Pat’s, 2022

*Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson went on a camping trip. As they lay down for the night, Holmes said: "Watson, look up into the sky and tell me what you see". Watson said: "I see millions and millions of stars". Holmes: "And what does that tell you?" Watson: "Astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Theologically, it tells me that God is great and that we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically, it tells me that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. What does it tell you? " Holmes: "Somebody stole our tent".*

Sometimes, we miss the obvious

This is as true with religion as it is with camping trips

And if there was one common consensus this past week

Among those many preaching bloggers

Who hold forth on the internet

Something maybe not that obvious to the rest of us

It is that Thomas has gotten a bum rap

And it is this gospel passage

These 12 verses from the 20th chapter of John

more than any other,

that are the source of this maligning

We have unwittingly contributed to this apostolic disparagement

And have even given him a title not found in the gospels

We call him Thomas the doubter

The gospel only calls him Thomas Didymus, Thomas the twin

Yet the gospel evidence around this disciple is quite rich

And disallows a simplistic caricature

That reduces Thomas to being only and ultimately a Doubter.

Rather there is substantial biblical evidence that this is also

Thomas the determined

Thomas the hardnosed

Thomas the unscamable.

Thus, earlier in John’s Gospel

When Jesus decides to go into dangerous Bethany

It is Thomas the brave who pipes up,

And insists the disciples go along

Even if it means dying with Jesus (John 11:16).

And when Jesus is giving his long mystical discourse

During the Last Supper

On the place where he was going

And the other apostles are apparently nodding their heads

Though they probably don’t have a clue

About what Jesus is telling them

It is Thomas the irrepressible who honestly confesses

that he does not know where Jesus is going (John14:5)

and does not know how to find the way

and is determined to get a straight answer out of Jesus

And on that first Easter eve

when Peter the chicken-hearted and the rest of the apostles

are locked in the back room of the Jerusalem Hilton

apparently afraid of their own shadows …

why is Thomas not there?

Who knows, maybe he’s out scowling the streets

looking for Jesus

And figures that while he’s out there

He might as well pick up some groceries

For his cowering apostolic friends.

When he does come back from his long search

Or the grocery story

And hears that the others have seen the Lord …

In his response is he being arrogant or just practical?

Maybe Thomas has seen enough snake oil salesmen

That he has no interest in being scammed

So he basically asks the gospel equivalent of

Where’s the beef?

Blessed are you, Thomas the unscamable.

In the words of Barbara Brown Taylor

“Thomas is a stand-in for all of us

Who want to see something for ourselves

Before we decide whether or not it is true.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

And of course when Jesus does appear

The risen one does not rebuke him

But makes an amazing invitation

To touch the wounded body of Christ

Which provokes the most profound profession of faith

In the gospel of John

“my Lord and my God”

Key to the power of this encounter

Is one of the most intimate forms of human communication

The gesture of human touch.

When thinking of important communication modes,

It is probably that the first things that come to mind are

speech, digital images, and music.

What we may not reckon with the primal nature of touch:

touch is the first sense that babies develop in the womb

touch receptors developing on their face

by week 8 of pregnancy.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Touch is also essential for the health of newborns;

studies show that well-nourished, safely sheltered infants

without touch

are likely to experience developmental problems

and even die[[3]](#endnote-3)

Touch starvation or “skin hunger” also occurs with adults.

Without enough physical touch we can become

stressed, anxious, or depressed.[[4]](#endnote-4)

How many of us experienced that during COVID-19,

when grandparents ached to touch their grandkids,

and family members longed to touch

sick and dying loved ones,[[5]](#endnote-5)

But it is not only in times of pandemic

that we need the power of human touch,

which medical research demonstrates

is necessary for the wellbeing of adults

Frequent hugs can lower blood pressure

Can aid combatting depression

It is demonstrated that it even helps NBA players play better

that is, when they performed bonding gestures

like high-fives, back-slapping, and chest-bumps.[[6]](#endnote-6)

The gift of touch enables us to make our way

Physically and metaphorically

Through a seemingly “senseless” world.

Most of us know the story of Helen Keller (d. 1968)

The most celebrated disability rights advocate

whose primary sense for making her way through the world

was touch

Go back and watch the scene in “The Miracle Worker”

At the water pump

When the experience of touch

opens Helen’s mind to completely new worlds.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Less well known than Keller was Laura Bridgman (d. 1889)

who lost the use of even more senses than Keller,

for example, Keller could smell and taste,

yet Bridgman became the first deaf-blind person

to receive a full education

all through the miracle of touch.[[8]](#endnote-8)

While it is not something we might often ponder

The Jesus of the gospels wielded the miracle of touch

With frequency and great aplomb

Multiple times this very tactile savior touched the blind

In healing them (e.g., Mark 8:22-26)

He touched the bier of the widow’s son

before he raised her [Luke 7:14)

He touched the leper to heal him (Matt 8:3)

He touched the servant of the high priest

and healed his severed ear (Luke 22:51)

And he touched his disciples when they

crouched in fear after the transfiguration (Matt 17:7)

Images of touch appear in each of today’s readings

In Acts signs and wonders were done

At the “hands” of the apostles

Both a metaphorical and literal reference

In John’s vision in revelation

The glorified Christ touched John with his right hand

Assuring him not to be afraid

And of course, there was the tactility of the Gospel

In which Jesus invites Thomas’ hand

Into the very wounds of the Crucified.

*Every two or three months, Thyago Ohana goes out on the busy streets of Vienna, Austria, with a big smile and a sign saying, "Free Hugs". The handsome 32-year-old Brazilian, who works in international trade at the Indian Embassy in Vienna, chooses a popular locale, like the historic shopping street Kaerntner Strasse. There he opens his arms to anyone who wants a hearty embrace.*

*He does it because once, back in 2012, when he was feeling very stressed and anxious during a visit to Paris, a stranger gave him a free hug. He's never forgotten how it filled him with unexpected calm and joy.*

*For those who take up his offer, getting a hug makes them laugh and smile. But sometimes it does more, as when an elderly woman in a tour group stopped and watched him. The group moved on, but she asked, "Can I have a hug?" "Of course you can!" said Thyago who wrapped his arms round her. When they broke their embrace, she kept holding on to his shoulders and looked into his eyes. "Thank you," she said. "I can't remember the last time I was hugged this way."*

*It's a memory that still makes him emotional. "It was a really powerful moment of human connection. It's why I keep doing it."*

The psychologist Dacher Keltner notes,

we live in a touch deprived world[[9]](#endnote-9)

We would rather stand apart,

maybe look out of curiosity,

but are cautious of getting to close,

with hand sanitizer on the ready

Thomas the apostolic tactilian

challenges any stand-offish form of Christian discipleship

a poignant challenge in these sometimes-disheartening days

when our world is witnessing too much crucifixion

and the wounds of the Christ

gape open in the flesh of humanity.

Thomas’ willingness to touch the wounds,

to get up close and personal with pain, even crucifixion,

prompts us to do the same

Our families, our neighbors, the stranger, the marginalized

are skin-hungry for the compassionate Christ

As we were touched by hand and water and chrism in baptism

so we are missioned to reach out to others

with the boldness of Thomas

and the Compassion of Christ whom we profess as Lord and God, forever and ever.

1. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way* (1999), p. 114. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.whattoexpect.com/pregnancy/fetal-development/fetal-touch/> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.newyorker.com/science/maria-konnikova/power-touch [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.webmd.com/balance/touch-starvation> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.une.edu.au/connect/news/2021/03/touch-hunger-causes-new-form-of-suffering-under-covid-19> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. <https://www.hcf.com.au/health-agenda/body-mind/mental-health/benefit-human-touch> [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.hcf.com.au/health-agenda/body-mind/mental-health/benefit-human-touch> [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. <https://www.todayifoundout.com/index.php/2011/11/a-woman-who-lost-the-ability-to-smell-taste-see-and-hear-as-a-child-was-the-first-deaf-blind-person-to-be-fully-educated/> [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. <https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/hands_on_research> [↑](#endnote-ref-9)