

Put Your Hand in the Hand

John 20: 19-29, 1 Peter 1: 3-9

There was a Christian song popular in the early 1970's: "Put Your Hand in the Hand". There was not nearly the prevalence of Christian rock music then as there is now, but this song was really popular. We've actually sung it a few times in one of the house church groups here at Crossroads during the past year [Robert Tims come and lead]. The words of the chorus are:

Put your hand in the hand of the man who stilled the water.
Put your hand in the hand of the man who calmed the sea.
Take a look at yourself and you can look at others differently
By putting your hand in the hand of the man from Galilee.

What do you think about when we sing that song? What does it mean to you? When I sing it, this is what it means to me.

- I trust the Spirit with my life and its direction
- I commit my whole self to being in partnership with God
- I do not have to rely on my own will-power or the strength of my community alone to be on this journey; Spirit is with me
- I trust the example of Jesus in whose life I can see a human being filled with God. Jesus gave us what we needed, and probably all we could grasp, of the nature and purpose of God in a human life.
- I connect with this truth in my life by loving others and myself with a Christ-like love
- I trust the power of the image that my "hand is in the hand of the man from Galilee"

The inspiration for the song probably came from the Gospel account of Peter stepping out of the sinking boat and trying to walk on the water to Jesus. He loses his nerve and starts to sink, but then reaches out and puts his hand in the hand of Jesus. The image of putting our hands in the hand of Jesus, however, reminds me of the story from John's Gospel about the man we now know as "Doubting Thomas". (read John 20: 19-29)

The story of Thomas and his doubts begins at evening on the day of resurrection – that first Easter. It is a story of resurrection appearances. The apostle Paul listed several such appearances and these appearances have long provided some of the most compelling evidence for a visible resurrection.

So, this account is a continuation of the Easter story. It is evening on that first day of the week. In John's account, Jesus does not plan to meet the disciples in Galilee and so they are huddled together in a locked upper room somewhere in or near Jerusalem. The doors are locked probably to keep the whereabouts of the disciples secret for fear of the authorities. In

this locked room, Jesus suddenly appears. He is in the form of what Paul called a "resurrection body," a form that clearly relates to his earthly body, even to the presence of the wounds of crucifixion. The disciples recognize him immediately as Jesus. Yet, this is not his earthly body brought back to a living state – not like the earlier story of Lazarus who was raised from death to continue his earthly existence. For Jesus, this form represents a new existence.

Jesus tries to comfort them, "Peace I give you". This wish for God's shalom reminds us of the words from the fourteenth chapter of John's gospel, "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you -- not as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid". Then he breathes on them, giving them the Spirit. In John's gospel, the Spirit is given that same day as the resurrection. It is a quiet event rather than the noisy fire of Pentecost as told in the book of Acts. Quietly, the church is born.

Someone is missing. Thomas, the Twin, is not there. When the others tell him about their experience of Jesus, Thomas makes his famous statement that he going to have to see for himself before he believes that Jesus is alive. Not only is he going to have to see, he is going to have to touch – to place his hands into the wounds of Jesus and convince himself that the Master has returned to them.

The following Sunday evening, on the eighth day from Easter, the disciples with Thomas are again assembled. Again, Jesus appears to them. Thomas is convinced. Not only is he convinced about Jesus' return, but he goes all the way, falling to his knees and confessing, "My Lord and my God".

There is an interesting subtext to the story of Doubting Thomas – really a side story. Elaine Pagels is a professor in the Religion Department at Princeton University. She has done groundbreaking work in translating the *Nag Hammadi* scrolls discovered in Egypt in the 20th century. She has written several books about what she is learning from these scrolls including *The Gnostic Gospels* and, most recently, *Beyond Belief*. These writings provide for us a clearer picture of the diversity within the Christian church toward the end of the first century after Christ.

It turns out that one of the scrolls, attributed to the disciple Thomas, reflects the viewpoint that Jesus was not divine, but was a mystic and teacher. Thomas also taught that Jesus not the only Way in himself, but pointed people toward the way of truth.

Apparently, the branch of Christianity represented by John's Gospel was in conflict with the Thomas Christians, not considering them true Christians at all. Then Pagels highlights the ways that the author of John's Gospel seems to go out of his way to paint Thomas in as poor a light as possible. The story of Doubting Thomas is pinnacle of that portrait. Thomas is seen as a lesser disciple for not having been present with the others that first Easter evening.

Because of his absence, Thomas misses out on the blessing Jesus gives to the others and also misses receiving the Holy Spirit from Jesus. He then makes a big show of needing proof and is confronted by Jesus the following week. Even though all the disciples see and touch Jesus before they believe, it is Thomas who is reproved and who bears the brand "Doubter". The final blow occurs when John's Gospel has Thomas kneeling before Jesus and confessing, "My Lord and my God."

Pagels' perspective gives all of us an interesting insight into the diversity of belief among the early Christians. By the second century, orthodoxy was becoming the dominant view of Christianity. By the time of Constantine two centuries later, the writings of Thomas and others had largely been destroyed, with the exception of the scrolls of *Nag Hammadi*.

What is there for you and me in the story of Doubting Thomas? This story is actually for us. Unlike the disciples in John's Gospel, we do not touch and see the risen Christ. So, it is we, not any of those disciples, who are among the blessed -- who believe without seeing and without touching. The New Testament letter called 1 Peter, probably not written by Jesus' disciple of that name, but certainly attributed to his authority, tells his readers and us: "You never saw [Jesus], yet you love him. You still don't see him, yet you trust him -- with laughter and singing. Because you kept on believing, you'll get what you're looking forward to: total salvation."

There are different ways that people come to the life of faith. Some have a clear and powerful experience of the Spirit's presence -- an undeniable encounter with God that changes the whole direction of their lives. The apostle Paul's experience on the road to Damascus is probably the most familiar example of that type of experience. It's the familiar conversion experience that many evangelists long for people to have. I have known people who have had a profound experience of the Spirit that led them to a life of faith. Our own Jim Pierce is one. Jim has shared his story several times within this congregation. His life continues to be a testimony of the validity of that experience.

There is another way that people come to faith. We grow up in it or are attracted by the presence of friends and get involved at church. My father grew up in East Texas in the 1920's. His own father had died and his mother raised four boys on a teacher's pay. He grew up with religious faith being part of everyday life. After leaving college for service during the second World War, he came home and really struggled with the direction of his life. He has told me of one sleepless night when, as he wrestled with this decision, he felt the clearest sense of the Spirit's presence and an undeniable call to enter the ministry.

I also grew up in church. Long after my commitment to faith, and even my choice to enter the ministry, I experienced a few deeply profound encounters with the holy that have deepened and focused my journey. These experiences can best be described as a clear sense of the presence of

the Spirit in my life. I did not come to faith as a result of the experiences, but they have become my touchstones – the places to which I return in memory when faith begins to feel shaky.

There is a third way that people come to, and live, the faith journey. These are people who believe and trust in the Spirit without having a clear experience of that presence. The most notable example I can think of is the author C. S. Lewis. A self-proclaimed agnostic, or even atheist, Lewis was eventually inspired by friendships to reconsider religious faith. He became convinced by his own reasoning and his commitment came by an act of his own will. Perhaps there are many here today for whom the journey of faith is much more a continuing act of choice and of will rather than allegiance to a previous experience.

It is this path to faith that Jesus extols in John's Gospel. It is extraordinary faith. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Great faith is to believe without seeing and without touching. You and I choose to see the world through the eyes of our faith and our faith blesses us. This is faith as vision -- how you choose to see life and its meaning.

The first song we sang this morning was called "I Believe in Jesus". To believe in Jesus means to trust in the example of Jesus' human life as depicted in the gospels. It is to take his life as the model for our lives with a profound focus on loving, healing, and empowering those who are left out.

To believe in Jesus also means to trust in the living presence of the Spirit. Our sense of who the Spirit is may be shaped in great measure by Jesus' human example, but faith can never be in the historical Jesus – only in the living Spirit: God with us. Only God is worthy of that faith. We believe and our faith allows a sense of the presence of the Spirit that grows more profound with the practice of prayer. Faith provides a sense of the power of the Spirit that grows clearer as we put our faith into action.

Genuine faith is strengthened on the journey of life. As we join hands with those walking beside us, in a profound and powerful way, we are putting our hands in the hand of the one who lived and died and who lives in us, around us, and most especially through us. This is the heart of the faith we proclaim. May the peace of God, the love of Christ, and the presence of the Holy Spirit fill and sustain you now and always.