

“Touching Jesus”
John 20:19-31
April 3, 2016
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings
As Christ breathes on us, we become the touch of Christ to others

They're scared. They lock themselves in the upper room, which was the last place they had felt comfortable—that room where they had supper with Jesus just a few days ago before everything fell apart. They're scared. They've seen Jesus get arrested and tried and put to death and the crowd that cheered them last week was now a mob looking for blood. And so they are scared and they have good reason to be. And when you're scared, what do you do? You lay low, you find a safe place, you lock yourself in. Are we any different? Where is that safe place for you? Where do you go when you're scared? When you were a kid, didn't you go into your room and close the door? Don't you just want to stay there and not venture out into the world?

When I was young my family lived up in the mountains northwest of Boulder. About half a mile up the canyon from our house was a beautiful park called Buckingham Park and I used to love to go there. But although it was an easy walk and an even easier bike ride from my house, I wouldn't ever go there alone. That's because halfway between our house and the park lived a great dane who, if he was outside at the time would run down to the edge of the road and bark furiously at anyone walking or riding by. And I was scared of dogs. So even though I never heard of that dog actually biting anyone, and a lot of the time he wasn't even outside, just the fear of him kept me from going. I stayed home because I was afraid of even the potential of being hurt. Do you do that? Do you stay home because of the potential of being hurt? We know this fear, don't we?

There's so much these days that we are afraid of, both in the church and in our society. “Every single day we're told to be afraid. From crime rates, to unemployment, terrorism to isolation, we are a people living in fear.

We're told to fear Isis.

We're reminded that we're on the brink of nuclear war with an untold number of countries.

We're told to be afraid of immigrants.

We're afraid of sickness.

We're afraid of loss.

We're told to be afraid of the wealthy.

We're afraid of what we lack.

We're afraid of our failures.

We're afraid of our past.

We're afraid of each other.”¹

I can't help but think that the current political climate in our nation is fueled by those fears, and whatever side of the political spectrum we are on, we are told to be afraid of someone, of something. Not unlike those disciples in the upper room on Easter evening we are locked in waiting for something terrible to happen. Aung San Suu Kyi, political activist, prisoner, and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize said it plainly and truly when she said, “The only real prison is fear, and the only real freedom is freedom from fear.”

But then something happens to those disciples. Jesus appears to them. Right with them in that locked upper room. And he breathes on them and says, “Peace be with you.” And they stop being afraid. Maybe not right then, maybe not completely, not yet, but soon. Instead of being filled with fear, they are filled with the presence of Christ, and they aren't so concerned about who might be outside because they have something else on the inside.

Except for one of them of course. For some reason, and we are not told why, Thomas is not there that night. Maybe he's the only brave one. Maybe he's out getting groceries. Maybe he disguised himself

1 Palmer, Michael. *A Plain Account-A Wesleyan Lectionary Commentary*, April 3, 2016

and went to the movies. We have no idea. But when he comes back the others tell him that Jesus has been there and they are totally convinced that it was him, but not Thomas. He wants to touch Jesus before he believes. For Thomas, faith isn't just about believing what someone tells you, it is experiencing it for yourself. He's not going to believe in something this crazy until he sees and touches Jesus for himself. He's no fool, not Thomas.

So when Jesus shows up a week later, he looks for Thomas especially. And he gives Thomas what he wants, gives him what he needs in order to believe. He shows him his hands and his side and says, Do not be unbelieving, but believe. And Thomas touches him. Or does he? The story doesn't say that he does, did you notice? John says that Jesus showed himself to Thomas and then Thomas fell on his knees and said, "My Lord and my God!" So did he touch him? Did he actually reach out his hand and touch Jesus? Some traditions insist that he did. According to many ancient traditions the apostle Thomas left Jerusalem in later years and preached the gospel in the lands to the east, eventually reaching as far as India. There are still Christian churches in India that claim Thomas as their founder. During the middle ages one European traveler wrote about visiting India and came to the city that held Thomas's tomb. He wrote that Thomas's body remained uncorrupted, and he described how Thomas's arm, believed of course to have touched Jesus, was displayed outside the reliquary. "Men of that country judge who is right by Thomas's hand," he wrote. "For if there be a quarrel between two parties and each affirms right is on his side, they cause the case of each party to be written in a scroll and put these scrolls in the hand of Saint Thomas; quickly the hand casts away the scroll that contains the false case." That story I don't know that I have faith in. I don't even know if Thomas actually touched Jesus, but I think he didn't need to. Jesus showed himself to Thomas, Jesus gave himself to him. Just as the disciples had been filled with the spirit the week before by Jesus' breath, I think Thomas is filled now and there is no more room for fear or doubt.

And so Thomas and the others soon leave the upper room, no longer afraid, because Jesus had touched

them, had breathed on them, had filled them with his spirit and given them peace.

We were created to be together, living in community with one another, sharing life together, forgiving one another, and inviting each other into the Kingdom of God. Fear short-circuits this calling. We stop seeking justice, fighting for reconciliation, and advancing the Kingdom of God.

He breathes on the disciples, he's saying, yes, I understand you're afraid, but be at peace. For you aren't helpless. You aren't hopeless. You aren't alone. Go, live in the power of the Holy Spirit. Live in faith and trust and hope, and not fear. Know that you're not going at this alone, and as you do it, know that even the power of sin and death cannot hold you.

He touches us, with his breath, with his spirit, with the bread in the sacrament, in the hand of another that he uses to embrace, to heal, to encourage. For we are the hands of Christ now. We take him into the world. We are the touch of Christ—and there's no reason to be afraid.