



“Reach Out Your Hand”

***Brenda Loreman
Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California***

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John 29:19-31 (NRSV)***

I have to admit that I have a rather conflicted relationship with the Gospel According to John. On the one hand, one of the things I love about this gospel is its beautiful, poetic language—and most of you know how I love poetry! It’s a language that’s full of rich symbolism and metaphor—right from the very beginning of the gospel. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it”¹ sets up this beautiful contrast of light and dark throughout the entire gospel. I also love the way Jesus talks about himself: “I am the way and the truth, and the life.”²

But on the other hand, that same beautiful language has been used as a sort of blunt instrument to beat people into theological submission. Right after Jesus says, “I am the way and the truth and the life,” he says, “No one comes to the Father except through me,”³ and that has been used throughout history by some Christians to claim that Christianity has the corner on the God market, and that ours is the only way to know God. This has been terribly destructive; it’s one of the reasons we have had trouble with interfaith relationships, and I really have a problem with that.

Another thing that I love about John’s gospel are his wonderful characters. These characters are really fleshed out and well-rounded and we can see ourselves in them and identify with them. For example, there’s the Samaritan woman at the well, whose story we heard a few weeks ago in Lent. She’s one of the few characters who actually has a serious theological discussion with Jesus, and he treats her as an equal conversation partner. Then there’s Mary Magdalene, whom we heard from last week. She’s the first one who sees and proclaims the risen Christ. And yet these two characters have often been dismissed and their contributions have been diminished. They are treated as fallen women. Mary Magdalene’s reputation is that she’s a prostitute, even though that idea is found nowhere in the gospel.

Knowing how John tends to get a little twisted out of shape, I think it’s important to look carefully at today’s featured character, Thomas. You know what his reputation has become

¹ John 1:5

² John 14:6a

³ John 14:6b

through history, what he has come to be called—“Doubting Thomas.” We know him as a skeptic. But if you look at his other appearances in the gospel, you learn that doubt and skepticism are not his main characteristics. You might remember from the story of the raising of Lazarus, in Chapter Eleven, that right after Jesus tells the disciples that Lazarus has died, Thomas says, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”⁴ And later, in Chapter Fourteen, Jesus tells the disciples that soon he will go away, and that he will prepare a place for them, and Thomas says, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”⁵ Thomas is eager, and generous, and questioning. He’s a seeker. And yet he’s been dismissed as nothing but a skeptic, someone who doesn’t believe. Instead of knowing him for who he really is, we only know that he’s a doubter.

As I approached the text for this week’s sermon, I wanted to pay close attention to the characters in this familiar story, and see how I could perhaps push past the traditional interpretations. One of the important clues in this story is in the behavior of Jesus. What I realized from his behavior is that this is not a story about reprimand and judgment; it is rather a story about hope and promise and overcoming fear.

When we first see the disciples in this story, they are locked in a room they’ve locked themselves away out of fear. They’re afraid of the authorities that had executed Jesus, and they’re probably wondering what will happen to them. I can imagine that they are wracked with guilt because they had failed to support Jesus in his hour of need, and they’re grieving. And they’re trying to understand the amazing, unbelievable news that Mary Magdalene had brought them that morning. And then Jesus appears to them. And he doesn’t condemn them. He doesn’t reprimand them for not sticking with them. He doesn’t say, “Where were you guys, you really messed up.” What does he say instead? He says “Peace be with you.” He breathes on them gives them the gift of the Holy Spirit, and he commissions them to go out into the world and continue the healing work he had begun. He enables them through his presence and his behavior to move from their fear into hope.

Thomas isn’t with them. He isn’t locked in the fear-filled room with the others, and that makes me wonder about Thomas, this eager, generous person who said “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” Maybe Thomas is already out in the world doing the healing work of Jesus. Maybe Thomas is the one who’s already got it. When Jesus appears before Thomas the next week, he doesn’t scold or reprimand Thomas, either. Instead, he makes a boldly intimate, vulnerable gesture. He gently offers himself to Thomas, in all his woundedness and broken humanity. “Here. Touch.”

This makes me think about what it means to recognize each other’s wounds and pain, and the power we give to each other when we are willing to be vulnerable to each other. Perhaps the power of this moment between Thomas and Jesus is not so much in over coming doubt, but in that vulnerable invitation to touch.

We know that touch is a basic human need. Part of the way we know this is by observing what happens when people are denied touch. Babies who are not touched fail to thrive or develop normally. Prisoners subjected to long-term solitary confinement develop serious

⁴ John 11:16

⁵ John 14:5

psychological wounds. We know also that touch can be destructive when it is used inappropriately, to harm or control, but no one can truly thrive without human touch, and we all know from own experience that touch can be powerfully healing.

One person who has explored the power of healing touch is Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen. Dr. Remen is a clinical professor of Family and Community Medicine at UCSF School of Medicine, and an early pioneer of holistic, integrative medicine; she's a medical educator and reformer. She speaks of the power of touch in her book *Kitchen Table Wisdom*.

She offers retreats for cancer patients where she has the patients do a form of hands-on healing with each other. The patients report powerful experiences during the exercise; but none is so powerful as when she does this same hands-on exercise with a room full of doctors.

In Western medicine, doctors are trained to use their hands as diagnostic tools. "If I touch here, does it hurt?" "Can you feel it if I squeeze your toe?" It's not a healing touch; it's a source of information, and only sometimes a method of treatment. Doctors are trained to connect their hands to their heads. They are not trained to simply sit in silence with someone and place their hands on them and touch them with a healing intent. They are not trained to be vulnerable, to allow someone to do this for them.

Dr. Remen relates one particularly powerful story about two doctors who practiced this exercise in her workshop.

There is a woman she calls Jane, a young, highly successful surgeon, brilliant, strong willed. She is very opinionated—usually right, but intimidating, someone who creates distance between herself and her colleagues. Jane is paired with a male oncologist, who tells his perspective of what happened.

At first the oncologist said he was going to play it safe, not really share what was hurting him, but Jane, his partner, told him about her back pain, how chronic it was, and how it often interfered with her work. So he decided to share, too.

He told her about his divorce, how painful it was and how it had prevented him from trusting people. She said to him, "Where does it hurt?" He couldn't really find the place, and so he just touched heart and he then lay down on the floor, and he closed his eyes, and Jane sat next to him for a while and was silent for such a long time that he thought, "She's not going to do it; she's not going to touch me," and he felt like he was going to cry.

And then he felt the palm of her hand, very gently touching him over the heart. And he was astonished at how warm her hand was, how gently and tenderly she touched him. And he felt a warmth radiate out from her hand and encompass his entire chest until it felt like she was holding his heart in her hand. He remarked at how strong her hand felt, and how powerful. He felt she was really there for the pain, that he was not alone; they both cried.

Later Jane spoke of how she had been disconnected from all her innate warmth and gentleness and tenderness. Her training had taught her to do this and she thought this part of herself had been lost. All the doctors in the room felt like she did. They realized "had been

trained to deny their wholeness in the mistaken belief that this would enable them to be of greatest service to others.”

The doctors wondered at how unusual it was to be touched by someone who wants only your well-being, how rarely they have been touched like this. They marveled at the peace they experienced in just meeting someone’s pain without the pressure to fix it.⁶

We are so accustomed to being problem-solvers and fixers, people who operate by facts and figures, that we forget that merely sitting and holding someone’s hand may be the most healing act we can do.

Perhaps the power of Thomas’ story is not in the moment when Thomas overcomes his doubt or skepticism. Perhaps the power in the story is in the moment when Jesus offers his wounds for Thomas to touch. Perhaps Thomas learned in that moment what those doctors learned; there is a peace that comes in merely meeting someone’s pain, in recognizing their brokenness.

The gospel account does not tell us if Thomas actually touched Jesus, but I like to think that he did. I like to imagine that moment, and think about how that boldly intimate, ridiculously vulnerable gift of Jesus is still available to us today. And we receive this gift whenever we have the courage, like Thomas, to recognize the risen Christ in each other’s wounds and pain, and when we help each other move from fear to hope and joy, through the simple power of a healing touch.

⁶ This story is related in Rachel Naomi Remen’s *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories That Heal*, pp. 237-241 (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996).