

Sermon for April 15, 2018 (Easter3B) “Touch and See”
(Based on 1 John 3:1-7 and Luke 24:36b-48)

It wasn't exactly what you'd call a religious experience. But, after almost two weeks of being sick, of missing both Communion and a Sunday service full of poetry, after using enough cloth hankies to make up an actual laundry load, after a week of wearing out my muscles with coughing and wearing out my tongue with cough drops and spicy chicken soups, I was finally well enough yesterday to venture out and meet some friends for lunch.

We were at Sarah's in Wiscasset. The sky was grey, the wooden seats were hard, but the menu was full of things that weren't cough drops or chicken soup. I ordered fish—a haddock shepherd's pie, though I'm not sure exactly what haddock has to do with shepherds. They apologized for being out of peas, and was it okay with me if they put spinach in the pie instead? Yes, I said, that would be fine. And when they served it up, steaming hot, the potatoes nicely roasted and the spinach nicely tucked into the creamy sauce with the tender flakes of fresh fish? It...was...heavenly.

It was heavenly because it knit me together again—back into the fabric of friendship, after days of isolation, back into the pleasure of re-awakened senses after the dull, fitful days of foggy-headedness and enforced extra sleep. It was so good to eat something hearty and solid and delicious, to feel that basic physical enjoyment.

Yet, if the 24th chapter of Luke's Gospel is anything to go by, that meal *was* a religious experience. After he returns from death, after that first meeting with Mary in the garden when he's still working his way back into his body and not quite ready to be touched, he shows up on the road to Emmaus, and then again in a room full of his confused, terrified, and overjoyed friends. And how do they know for sure it's him? His explanations don't reach deep enough. His talk of scripture, even the sound of his voice and the look in his eyes are not enough, because nothing makes sense in that horrible space after you've witnessed and grieved someone's suffering and death.

How do they come to recognize that it's Jesus, for sure, in their midst? How do they come to know him? In Emmaus, they know him at last when he sits down with them for a meal and breaks the bread. And later, in this room full of people, how do they know he's not some

disembodied apparition, come back to haunt or to taunt or to warn? At first glance, the Gospel says, they were “startled and terrified.” Jesus doesn't judge them for feeling that way. He doesn't tell them not to feel what they are feeling. Instead, he offers them the most direct reassurance he can:

“Look at my hands and my feet.” Jesus says. “Touch and see.”

“Touch and see.” He doesn't throw theology around. He doesn't tell them what's correct or acceptable to think or feel or believe. He offers the reassurance of skin in contact with skin, the soft yielding of skin, the firmness of muscle and tendon, the solidity of bone.

And then, in the way feelings swing wild in the wake of grief, they go from anxiety and fear to joy and confusion. Luke says, “while, in their joy, they were disbelieving and still wondering...” Still, Jesus welcomes all of it, accepts whatever state their hearts and minds are in, and recognizes that they're in no state to manage all this alone. Gently, with the same love that allowed him to touch a leper and comfort a woman who'd been bleeding for years, with *that* same love, Jesus says, “you know what? I'm hungry. Have you got anything to eat?” And he sits down in a folding chair, next to the funeral buffet, and someone brings him a paper plate, and he eats the same stuff they're eating—a piece of broiled fish.

And only after he's opened his mouth, and eaten with them, only after this solid food, this unvarnished commonplace communion, only after *this* does he talk about meanings, ideas, interpretations. Only after they've opened their mouths together does he seek to open their minds, to talk of the greater network of love that surrounds them, binding them back into the fabric of the community, the world, the universe. And then, holding all their awkward edges in his rough, scarred, and loving hands, acknowledging their anxiety and fear, their joy and disbelieving and questioning, he reminds them again: repentance and forgiveness: that's the news I want you to keep telling.” Why? Why them? Why not ask the devout, or the wise, or the calm, or the perfect? And Jesus, lover of the world, healer of the sick, eater of bread and broiled fish, says, “you are witnesses to these things.”

I missed you all terribly last week. I missed you, and I missed all the poetry, and I missed Communion. And I know you all worshipped beautifully and meaningfully without me there. But—you know—poetry is one of my favorite acts of witness. It's one of the ways I try to

“touch and see.” And the poet Mary Oliver sort of sums up this week's Gospel lesson in a tiny stanza tucked into the middle of a poem entitled, “Sometimes.” She writes,

“Instructions for living a life:

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it.”

To follow Jesus on the Way towards redemption and resurrection, you don't have to fearless. You don't have to glow with inner peace. You don't even have to believe all this stuff all the time. There's room in the work of faith for failure, for pain, for everything. Touch and see.

All Jesus asks is that you sit down, when you can, and offer your hunger as a prayer that his hunger can meet. Touch and see.

The Jesus who walked with us, who held tools in his hands, who laughed with his friends and splashed in rivers, who lingered in the garden and staggered under a heavy load, who was beaten and punished and crucified, the Jesus who cheated death to come back and eat with us again—this man is not interested in perfection. After the resurrection, Rome was still there. Herod was still in power. Soldiers still marched. Persecution didn't end. But—touch and see: like a loaf of bread, the Good News had been broken open. The promises of God can show up in any humble package: a shared walk, a funny poem, a group of people with busy schedules, shoehorning in a meeting to make sure hungry kids get fed, the sound of feet keeping rhythm with a fiddle in an old wooden church, a server who says they're out of peas but brings you some nice warm fish. Touch and see: like a dandelion, the Good News has taken root, and the seeds of renewal are scattered everywhere.

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it.

You are witnesses to these things. Keep it up!

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