

Touchy Feely

John 20:19-31

Preached FCCW, 4/23/2017

The Sunday after Easter is sometimes referred to as Holy Humor Sunday.

The reason for that is, on Good Friday, when Jesus died,
the Devil thought he had won.

But on Easter Sunday, God played the biggest joke ever by raising Jesus from the dead.

So, the Holy Humor Sunday tradition has been to include some humor in worship on that day.

Actually, the title of this sermon – Touchy Feely – is itself kind of funny, because,
let's face it, the reputation we New England Congregationalists have acquired
is anything but touchy feely.

Just raising our palm fronds on Palm Sunday,

and maybe giving them a little wiggle

is about as animated as we tend to get in worship.

After all, our ancestors were the Pilgrims and Puritans;

people who were so stoic they used to buckle their hats onto their heads.

There's a joke about a guy who died and in the afterlife

found himself on a road with a gate on each side.

One was the Pearly Gate.

St. Peter was there checking people into Heaven.

Across the road, at the other gate was the devil,

who was checking people into... well, you know... the OTHER place.

Just beyond that gate was a huge pit with smoke and fire and brimstone
billowing up from its depths.

Every time a person checked in through that gate,

the Devil would toss them over the edge of the abyss into the fire below.

But some people didn't get thrown in right away.

The Devil had them stand and wait at the edge of the pit.

The man asked the Devil who those people were and why they didn't get thrown in immediately.

The Devil answered, "Those are Congregationalists.

They're so stiff and frigid they need to thaw out first before going in or they won't burn worth a darn."

While we may sometimes be lumped in with Anglicans and Presbyterians as God's Frozen Chosen, there's no denying that Jesus had no problem with being touchy feely when the situation warranted it.

He touched lepers, foreigners, tax collectors and sinners that no one else would go near.

He washed his disciples feet and allowed a woman to wash his feet with her tears and dry them with her hair.

He wept openly and allowed Judas to greet him with a kiss even as he was about to betray him.

The Gospels tell several stories of the resurrected Jesus appearing to people who had known him while he was living.

All these stories share something in common.

The people who encounter the Risen Jesus don't know it's him at first.

Only after he says or does something personal and intimate, do they realize it's him.

Mary Magdalene sees him outside the empty tomb, but mistakes him for the gardener, until he speaks her name.

Two disciples walk with him for hours without knowing who their companion is until they stop to eat and Jesus breaks bread with them.

Then their eyes are opened to know who he truly is.

The most touchy feely of all these resurrection stories though, is the one I just read.

Jesus comes to the disciples in a locked room.

But they don't realize who he is until he shows them the nail scars in his hands

and the spear scar in his side.

Only then, does it say that they “saw the Lord”

instead of just seeing a mysterious stranger.

Because Thomas was not with them when Jesus appeared,

the other disciples are waiting tell him about it as soon as he walks in the door.

But, Thomas won't settle for taking their word for it.

He demands to see the Risen Jesus for himself.

And, not just see him, but touch his scars.

This demand has had the unfortunate effect of changing the name by which Thomas has been remembered from Thomas the Twin to Thomas the Doubter.

“Don't be a Doubting Thomas” we've been told.

But what if this story isn't about Thomas' doubt, but his desire?

About his refusal to settle for a faith that was too much head and not enough heart?

Thomas wanted the same kind of touchy feely encounter with Jesus that the other disciples got to have.

If anything, Thomas is a role model.

Because you and I should refuse to settle for just believing what other people tell us about Jesus.

Listen, I never want you stop at just believing what I say about Jesus from this pulpit.

I do want you to hear what I preach as an invitation and an inspiration to getting touch feely with Jesus yourselves.

For Jesus to be more and more someone who you know, not just know about.

Then, maybe we can warm up to the possibility of letting our guard down and letting our scars and imperfections show a little.

Scars are not what we usually want to be known for.

If anything, scars are something we try to hide.

Some scars we conceal with Botox or clothing.

Other scars we hide behind emotional walls that we build around us to keep people at a distance.

So, revealing our scars to another person is a touchy feely thing to do because it makes us vulnerable.

At the same time, it makes us relatable.

That's how people find strength in support groups.

Being part of a community where we witness others bearing life's scars but no longer defined by the wounds that put them there reveals in them – not weakness – but healing power.

And the power to be healers to each other.

Jesus breathed on the disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit.

As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

And the Church was born.

How did God send Jesus?

He sent him to heal the world by his scars.

And Jesus sends us – his Church—in the same way.

Not by admonishing the world to be more like us.

But by fearlessly letting the world see how much we have been like them.

Because, that's when the world gets to see a little more of Jesus in us.

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