



April 23, 2006

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

John 20:19-31

“A Touchable, Wounded God”

When I was a child I had many questions about God. God, and also Jesus after his resurrection, was something like a cloud. God seemed misty, vague, incomprehensible, remote, far off, fuzzy, mysterious, VERY different from us, children of the earth. Then I heard the story about Jesus’ follower who had trouble believing in his resurrection—that “doubting Thomas” guy. People were never kind about him. They’d even call each other “you doubting Thomas!” in the middle of disagreements. Thomas was not someone I should be like, I thought.

But year by year, as Easter would come and go, and I’d hear again about Thomas, I started to have sympathy for him. I could easily see myself being like him. And that verse in our reading bothered me, where Jesus says, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

Uh-oh. I was supposed to have a strong faith in God. I should never doubt, never crave evidence, but believe in God powerfully without SEEING with my own eyes. I felt guilty because I wasn’t sure I could do it. I wanted to SEE the risen Christ. I wanted more than a misty, unsubstantial God, who was always perfect and right and who disapproved of my doubts. “Blessed are you who have not seen and yet believed.” I felt I was one of the UNBLESSED. I felt left out, looked down upon by those folks who WERE blessed- the ones who managed this feat that was not possible for me: believing without seeing.

I identified with Thomas, who said, “Not only do I have to see this with my own eyes, but I have to TOUCH the reality of Jesus in the flesh MYSELF.”

Thomas had missed the post-Easter party, you see. The other disciples were together conferring and anguishing over the tragic events of the past few days. But Thomas wasn’t there. Perhaps he was being cautious- it might not be wise for the followers of a man just executed for treason to congregate together. But, whatever the case, he

wasn't there when Jesus showed up and breathed his Spirit on his friends and followers.

When they told him about it, he may have remembered situations where the disciples were naively accepting of Jesus' obscure and confusing sayings. They weren't as down-to-earth as Thomas. They didn't object when Jesus insisted on returning to Judea to be with the family of his recently deceased friend, Lazarus. It was up to Thomas to point out that the last time they were in that area Jesus had barely escaped being stoned. And even with that reminder, Thomas couldn't stop Jesus. So, Thomas told the others, "We might as well go along, and die with him." (Jn. 11:16)

Jesus said many things to his disciples just before his death. About going to a new place, and that he would prepare a place for them there. "You know the way to the place I am going," he told them. They sat in worshipful silence, but Thomas couldn't repress his honest response: "Jesus, we don't have the foggiest idea of where you're going! How could we know the way to get there?"

Thomas loved Jesus. He loved the other disciples. But this was a case of enough is too much. Maybe they just couldn't accept the death of their teacher and friend, and had to find some way of denying that reality.

Thomas needed something. He needed evidence to show this wasn't fantasy, wishful thinking, or mass hysteria. Thomas may have said, in the words of Christian Century author and preacher Richard B. Hays, "Come on, guys, it's all very well for you to use metaphors to describe your religious experience; just don't ask me to believe that your poetic confessional language should be construed as having ostensive reference." Or, in the words recorded in Scripture, if we were to translate directly from the Greek, Thomas said, "Unless I THRUST my finger into the mark of the nails in his hand, and unless I THRUST my hand into his side, NO WAY will I believe it."

Thomas needed evidence. And I do not believe this Scripture tells us we're to be ashamed to be like Thomas. God knows and understands the human need for the concrete—for things we can see, taste, hear, touch and smell. God made us that way! This passage reveals a God who accepts this in us: a touchable God. A wounded God.

Look at the story, friends. Jesus didn't avoid Thomas. He didn't come to Thomas in a dream saying, "Hey, guy, too bad, you missed my appearance at the Easter party, but you'd better believe in my Resurrection anyway, or else." NO! Jesus came, in the flesh, to visit the disciples again, at a time when Thomas was present. He went directly to Thomas and said, "Okay, friend, here I am. Look, see, come close, touch me." And again, the Greek is more vivid than English translations permit. Jesus said, "Bring your finger here and see my hands, and bring your hand and thrust it into my side. Stop doubting. Believe."

There's an old story I've told many times, about a little child who was having bedtime and sleeping problems. The parents tried a lot of things: a night light, a stuffed bear, a favorite old baby blanket. Still the child cried out in the night. Finally the dad said, "Honey, you know you don't need to be afraid. Remember, God is always with you—Jesus is right here, living in your heart." The child pulled the father close to whisper, "I know, Dad, but there are times when I need someone with SKIN on!"

See, for me, that's why I'm a Christian. Because the Gospel story tells me God knows I need someone with skin on, too. We all do. So, at Christmas, God became flesh, came to us, with skin on. And at Easter, God raised flesh to new life, and came to his friends with skin on. God came to Thomas in the Risen Christ and said, "Here I am, friend, with skin on!"

Our reading today is a story about who God is and what God is like. It's a story that promises the risen Christ WILL appear in my life, sometimes in the skin of folks who together make up the body of Christ. Christ WILL invite me close, to touch and know his reality. It will not duplicate Thomas' experience, but will meet my needs for faith and trust.

This reading also tells the story about what it means to know that Christ is alive. There are three things, at least, that Thomas recognized when he exclaimed, "My Lord and my God!" – Three things we must open our eyes to see.

First, God suffered for us: REAL suffering, REAL pain. Jesus did not show a HALO to his followers to prove his existence. He showed them his WOUNDS. Even the RISEN Christ bears the marks of pain. God could have healed the nail marks in his hands and feet, the wound in his side. Christ bears these wounds as a testimony to the power of evil in the world; the reality of suffering which he shares with us, and accepts for us. The power of death is conquered at Easter, but the wounds remain.

Second, Jesus said, "As the Father has sent me, I send you." These are not comforting words. To follow Jesus, we must, like him, understand there will be wounds that we, too, experience. We must be willing to trust him despite the dangers. We are in no way promised protection from pain and hurt and we follow our Lord.

Third, we are called to enter into life in community, with and for others. You can't touch Christ's wounds and go to meditate on the glories of God in privacy forever. Our faithfulness must take us into the world where we sacrifice for others. The world says, "Unless I thrust my hand into the church and find real wounds, I will never believe your nonsense about this suffering God."

There are many ways God calls us to make that sacrifice. Giving of ourselves, all we are and all we have is really what he wants. That happens day by day in a multitude of ways.

As a pastor of the church, I am aware that when God calls us to offer our POSSESSIONS (not just the ones we don't want or need) and when God calls us to offer our MONEY (not just what's left over, but at least a TENTH of all we receive) we become a LOT like Thomas. God assures us that such giving will BLESS US. And we are dubious. We are mightily doubtful. Friends, we have to TRY it to FIND OUT. Thomas had to TOUCH Jesus to believe. He had to draw near, and do exactly what Jesus told him to do. Giving faithfully to God allows us to experience God's creative care and provision in ways we couldn't otherwise. We are given the opportunity to be amazed, like Thomas, and exclaim, "My Lord and my God!"

Friends, we have to take some RISKS. We have to do things that seem HARD. We have to be willing to be RADICAL and do things that seem to make US vulnerable. We can never stand AMAZED by what God can do, what God can accomplish, how God will provide, if we play it SAFE all the time. Christ is here today urging us, "Take a chance! Give it all! Lean on me alone! You will be AMAZED."

There is an interpretation of the Christian faith that promises all joy and gladness. Of course joy and gladness is promised. But wounds are in the story all the time. We worship a mighty, mighty God. A mighty God whose power is in making himself weak, whose might is in making himself vulnerable by loving. We worship a tremendous God, but stop before you see this God as a muscled and healthy, glistening gladiator, a powerful Charlton Heston. Stop. This story tells us the Lord we serve, the God we worship, the Christ we follow is wounded. Our God is not far off or fuzzy. Our God is SPIRITUAL, but not the way we commonly think of that in misty terms that denigrate the material universe. Our God is EMBODIED spirit- God in the flesh. And our God bears wounds in that body.

Friends we are promised that Christ will come to us, often in ways we do not expect. The Risen Christ shows us that sacrifice and pain can be transformed by God's Resurrection Power. We are called to witness, to share with others our experiences. We must celebrate and share the good news of God's wounded triumphant love in the wounded and anguishing world. Will we do this? Christ is counting on us. God, make it so. Amen.