



Date: April 16, 2017 – Easter Sunday

Title: "In Touch"

Scripture: John 20: 18-28

Description: When Jesus appeared a second time to the disciples, with Thomas present, touch was introduced into the Easter story. In order to be complete, holy must include the physical. In order to be alive, faith must include physical action.

In my next life, I've decided to be a preacher. Not a Presbyterian preacher, a real preacher. This is what I'm talking about.

(video clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-qJOV9pqbh8> 22:10-22:47) (From "I'll Holler if I Have To", by Jonathon Suber.

Jonathon Suber is a superstar among Pentecostal preachers, a dynamo of energy. But he is rather laid back compared to some of the mountain preachers I grew up hearing in East Tennessee. I've spent a lifetime making fun of Pentecostal preaching, but recently I've changed my mind about them. There's a lot about that kind of preaching I admire.

There's plenty of volume, for one thing. A sheer decibel level that is impressive. You don't have to attend their worship, just walk within three blocks of their church and you can hear the sermon. I've seen preachers in tiny rooms with a dozen people in the congregation, but still they use a microphone with speakers this high. If you claim to be preaching, you better bring the heat.

Most of all, I'm impressed with how physical it is. The preacher sheds his jacket and gets sweaty. And the listeners don't sit still and silent. They not only talk back, with "Amen!" and "Preach it, now!" they also get up and move around. The gentlemen behind this preacher set the example. Preaching is not just vocal, it's physical.

What does this have to do with Easter? It's Easter Sunday and I'm offering a clinic on preaching style? What does this have to do with Easter?

This kind of preaching and Easter are both in touch with the physical. The bodily, in-the-flesh aspect of it are vital. Without that part, something very important would be missing.

Let's get physical with Easter. Let's get physical with our faith. We don't want to be so heady, so dry, so intellectual. We want to feel something. A shudder. A shiver. An almost involuntary shaking of the hands or movement of the hips. We want to touch the God we can name in our heads and hear about in sermons. We want a faith that gets physical, and Easter Jesus we can reach out and touch.

From our very inception, God gets physical with us. I know, God spoke and said "Let there be light; let there be sea and dry land..." and the sound of God's voice was all that was needed. But when God formed that first human, God got down in the dirt and formed Adam with his hands. God didn't just speak you into being; God's hands got dirty with that bit of business. Then God, wiping his hands on his robe declared, "Now that's very good!" Back on Ash Wednesday, when you felt ashes being smeared on your forehead, you were told to remember, "From dust you were made and to dust you shall return." It wasn't a threat; it was a promise. You aren't a bit of breath; you are hued out in the dirt. You have some real substance to you.

So does God. In a late-night wrestle-mania, Jacob body slams God, and God fights back with bone-wrenching vengeance. In the morning, Jacob doesn't say, "I had the strangest dream; it was unreal." No, Jacob walks with a limp.

In the wilderness, the people are dying of thirst. God tells Moses to hit a rock with a stick and the rock gushes forth fresh, clean water. But Moses hit that rock three times, while God had told him to hit it once. As a result, Moses wasn't allowed to set his old feet upon the Promised Ground. I know. It sounds harsh to me also, such a punishment for such a detail. I never have understood that, but I do get this much: physical is important.

The Old Testament Law describes chapter after chapter what can be eaten, touched, and tithed. Likewise, the Temple is constructed with detailed instructions: measurements, metallurgy; even the pots and pans all matter. In the Bible, holiness is not holiness unless it occupies a space. As Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "Matter matters to God."

This encounter Thomas has with the risen Christ, we've interpreted it as an attitude check. We've named him "Doubting Thomas." (We did that; there's nothing about *Doubting* Thomas in the Bible.) We preach that story as being about how Jesus got Thomas' thinking straightened out, turned his doubts into faith. I don't think so. I

call this the story of “Touching Thomas.” Earlier, Jesus had appeared to the disciples and they fell to the floor in worship. But something was missing. Something got overlooked, something that the disciples would need if their faith was going to be sufficient. They needed to touch. Enter Thomas.

With Thomas, Easter got physical. “Look at this,” Jesus had told his disciple in his first appearance. “Look at my hands and my side,” his very first post-resurrection command. They look, but they do not touch. Thomas, on the other hand, is told to touch: “Reach out and put your hand...” At that point resurrection becomes very physical.

Some people say that the resurrection is the disciples’ desire to continue to remember Christ, to speak of his message as still powerful, their memories as still alive. I know people, devoted Christians, who believe that the resurrection was strictly a spiritual thing. It was a group psychological phenomenon. You can go there and be Christian, but I can’t go with you. Because the scripture doesn’t go there. “Put your hand here. Touch here.” Easter got physical. Read the stories; every Easter story contains physical elements. Resurrection is not some smoke and mirrors image; it is a physical triumph.

You can believe it was all somebody’s imagination, but, though the disciples couldn’t explain it with precision, they insisted they had done something more than feel Jesus’ presence or believed in him. They had touched him.

We need to hear that, because these days, our faith is moving away from the physical. A real God with a physical history gets replaced by thoughts inside our heads. We are in danger of living in a universe of ideas and concepts and opinions. We are substituting “like” in place of commitment, blogs in place of behavior, the status of Facebook “friend” in place of true relationships. I’m not railing against social media; I’m talking about our latest form of the first and oldest rival to real faith. It was called “Gnosticism”, and it was all about ideas and opinions and viewpoints. Getting your hands dirty and your feet sweaty were just too messy. Besides, hands and feet can get scarred, sides can get pierced.

“I really mean well,” she explained to me recently. “I really mean well; I just don’t do very well.” As though one could be exchanged for the other without loss. As though meaning well was her personal talent, while others are gifted with the ability to do well.

Faith that is all spirituality, all inside your head and consists only of your opinions, your feelings about God, your personal beliefs—that spiritual-only faith isn’t

just a little anemic; it's dead. Faith-without-physical is dead. Faith without action is dead. It needs more than a vitamin supplement, it needs the risen Christ. It needs the one who still smells of sweat and spices, fresh and unsightly scabs on his brow, the one who doesn't cover up scars and wounds, but offers them as evidence of what God does in this world. You need Easter to get physical.

I sometimes hear of a friend in need and decide I need should give them a call. Only I get busy, and a few days later I think, "I really need to reach out to them." After several times of remembering them and reminding myself about their struggle, I begin to think that I've actually done something. And, in reality, I haven't done a thing. It's so easy to get feelings mixed up with actions and to think one is the same as the other.

There are plenty of people who will say the right things, offer the right opinion about things, even believe the right things. God is looking for people who *do* the right things. Jesus wants disciples, not admirers. Jesus wants followers, not fans.

Why else did Jesus spend his last night on earth teaching his disciples to wash feet and share supper? With all the concepts and truths in the universe to teach them, he didn't give them something to think about when he was gone. He gave them things to do. "*Do this* in remembrance of me," he said. Not "Think about this, but *do this*."

Jesus didn't return for a second appearance to the disciples because he had additional eternal truths to reveal or because he wanted to describe life in heaven. He didn't return just to include Thomas. He returned to that room so they could encounter his body. He returned to invite them to reach out and touch.

If you are tired of arguing about religion and politics, if you are tired of reading about spirituality, tired of talk-talk-talking about things that matter without doing a single thing that matters yourself, then try doing what Thomas did: reach out and touch.

We have honored the Lord's Supper as a sacrament. Perhaps we should make touching another's scars into a spiritual act as well. True faith might mean actually touching someone's life, and it might sound something like this: "Wow, how did you get that scar? What happened? Does it still hurt? No, it isn't ugly, at least not just ugly. It's holy, somehow, especially the story behind it."

Jesus invited Thomas to get physical with resurrection. Easter invites us to get physical with our own faith. Real actions with real human beings. It made Thomas fall to his knees exclaiming, "My Lord and my God!" It could make us cry out, "Hallelujah, Christ is risen! Celebrate this day of days!"