"Peace" He Says – "Touch me" He says

Paul West, April 23, 2006 (2 Easter, Year B)

Isaiah 26:2-9,19 Psalm 118:19-24 1 John 5:1-6 John 20:19-31

Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." (John 20:26b-27 NRSV)

What was it really like – there in that secret room, hidden away, closeted with fear and despair? He had died – his body placed in a donated tomb. And their dreams – those who traveled with him, those who cared for him – their still fragile hopes, had died with him. There they gathered, alone (or so they thought) – shattered and in hiding. What was it really like?
Whatever it truly was, it was a kind of isolation and despair greater than our imagination and understanding. There they huddled in their locked-up darkness, unsure and unmoving, quite done in.

Suddenly, without preface or explanation, Jesus is with them, no longer dead but risen and present. "Peace be with you," he says. He shows them his wounds. He blesses them with the gift of the Spirit. Then, just as suddenly, he is gone.

Later they tell this to the Apostle Thomas who had not been with them, and his reaction is no different from what you and I might have done. In effect he says, "O, come on! This I have got to see!"

One week later Thomas and the others are all together in the same room. Again the doors to the house are shut, and once more Jesus comes to stand among them. "Peace be with you," he says. Quickly he turns his attention to Thomas. "Put your finger here. . . .Reach out your hand and put it in my side." We know the rest of the Gospel story.

Familiar though it is, it is not Thomas' doubt and Jesus' admonition that draws my attention. It is something else that claims me today.

What touches my mind and my heart are the wonderful words of the Risen Christ! "Peace be with you. . . .Reach out your hand and put it in my side." He speaks, not just to Thomas, but to the Church, across all time, even to us – right now, just here, just where we really are.

"Peace" he says; "touch me" he says.

We find ourselves in locked up rooms – darkened by apprehension and anxiety about global issues of conflict and death, poverty and disease, oppression and abuse. We find ourselves in locked up rooms – fearful for loved ones afflicted with serious illness or the effects of aging or the ravages of other deep struggles. We find ourselves in locked up rooms – alone and trapped within our personal hesitations or feelings of inadequacy or whatever inner demons hold us back and keep us captive.

Faithfully and beyond all words, he comes to us right there within those darkened rooms, not once but again and again, often quite surprisingly. He bids us receive the healing gifts of the peace he bears. He reaches out to us and invites us to reach out to him – to the limitless gifts of his presence. He invites us to come out of that private darkness and to focus our life energies where we discern God's works of transformation and justice.

"Peace" he says; "touch me" he says.

I long to hear those words. Without shame or apology, it is quite personal. I remember, with affection and deepest respect, the very direct and simple words of a Methodist hymn I sang years back with Mom and Dad:

"I need Thee, O I need Thee,
Every hour I need Thee;
O bless me now, my Saviour,
I come to Thee!"

"Peace" he says; "touch me" he says. We hunger for that voice.

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But where do we find him? How may we move toward that promised gift of true and inner peace? Where do we reach out to touch him and to be touched in return? Where do we hear the voice?

Part of the answer is a known and familiar part of faith's lived experience.

Sometimes we hear the voice within the private honesty of our personal prayer – when we simply let ourselves and our feelings and our needs stand open within the Holy Presence. Sometimes we hear the voice when we let our hand rest in the baptismal water of the font, and the voice strengthens us to cherish and to trust our part in God's work in the world. Sometimes we hear the voice when we gather together, in Christ's presence, to receive the gracious gifts of the Eucharist. Sometimes we hear the voice when we are weary and frustrated in our everyday work, knowing our human limits, yet realizing that what we do is a part of what God is doing.

At unexpected moments the voice can surprise us. Last Sunday, Easter Day, Shannon and John Hamill and John's mother were here with Lauren. Devin was leading us in the Renewal of Baptismal Vows. He asked us the five questions that are part of the baptismal covenant to which we energetically responded "I will, with God's help." Shannon who was holding Lauren felt as though Lauren was striking her, and she looked down. Lauren's speech is delayed, and she has learned some signs. What Shannon felt and then saw was Lauren making the sign for "help".

How can I say what that means? Here with us, on the Feast of Easter, was this dear and precious child for whom we have been praying since very soon after her birth. And she, hearing us say "help", was able to join us to say "help" in the way she knows how to do. Something about that is so profoundly right and powerful. Lauren and we, child and adult, are absolutely one in the presence of Christ. Together we are saying "help" – help us to be, help us to know joy, help us to do what you have given us to do, help us to live within your eternal Easter!

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Within the journeys of our spirits there is a further, almost audacious part of the answer to our hunger. The voice we long to hear is not "out there" – some external presence of sentimental imagining. The One who speaks is already in us. There is no room he may not enter, even the rooms of our inmost being. We have sought him but he has already found us. He is the heart's center of the truth that is our truth. To "touch" him is to "touch" the very center of ourselves.

St. Augustine says it with the beautiful extravagance of his poetic writing:

Late have I loved you, beauty so ancient and
so fresh.
Late have I loved you.
Behold, you were within and I was outside,
and I was seeking you there.
I, deformed, was pursuing you in the beautifully formed things that you made.
You were with me, but I was not with you.
Those things held me far away from you,
things that would not exist if they were not in you.
You called and clamored and shattered my deafness;
you flashed and gleamed and banished my blindness;
you were fragrant and I drew in breath and now pant for you.
I tasted and now I hunger and thirst for you;
you touched me and I have been set ablaze
with longing for your peace.
(St. Augustine, Confessions [10:38], translated by Scott MacDonald)

"Peace" he says; "touch me" he says.

Perhaps our inmost prayer might be the words I sang in childhood –

"I need Thee, O I need Thee,
Every hour I need Thee;
O bless me now, my Saviour,
I come to Thee!"

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