

Put your Finger Here; John 20:24-31
April 2020
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Hello Friends,

Grace and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ, our risen Lord. The Lord is risen indeed!

My name is Doug Luginbill and I'm the Conference Minister for the Central District Conference of Mennonite Church USA of which your congregation is a member. I give thanks for your congregation, for your ministry to one another and to your community. Together, as 46 churches spread across 11 states, we are finding our way through this unexpected season. I am so thankful for your faithfulness!

The Easter message that I am sharing with you today is from the Gospel of John, chapter 20, verses 24-31. This follows Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene, who is the first witness to the resurrection and who becomes a witness to the other disciples. Then Jesus appears to the disciples who are huddled in fear behind closed doors. He offers words of peace. And then he shows them his wounds. But one of the disciples, Thomas, is not present. Listen to this familiar story once again.

Read John 20:24-31.

This is the story that gives the disciple Thomas his nickname; Doubting Thomas. Perhaps the name is well earned. But I venture to say, most if not all of us would be deserving of a similar title as well. Doubting Doug, Wondering Wanda, Disbelieving David, Incredulous Emma, Suspicious Sally?

Well, so much for nicknames. What might we glean from this ancient story today? Or what might we be invited to consider in this season of pandemic as the church remains scattered among our cities, villages and country sides?

On one level, this appearance by Jesus provided the first disciples with eyewitness evidence of the physical resurrection of Christ. One of the ways Jesus verifies his identity with the disciples is to show him his wounds. Thomas, who was not with the other disciples upon Jesus first appearance, says, "Unless I put my finger

in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” Seeing is not enough. He needs to touch, to examine, to feel!

So, when Jesus appears again with Thomas is present, Jesus fulfills Thomas’ request. “Peace be with you.” Jesus repeats. “Thomas, put your finger here and see my hands.”



Unknown Artist

Sometimes visual images are helpful. Here is one artist’s rendering of Thomas touching the wounded hand of Christ. It’s a rather simple image; a finger in the nail print; another nail wound in the back of the other hand. I invite you to reflect on the image for a moment. (Pause)

Thomas’ response to the evidence is, “My Lord and my God.” Thomas becomes an eyewitness with all the proof he needs. The one whom he saw crucified is now alive!

At one level, this story of Thomas encountering the risen Christ is an invitation to confess “Jesus is the risen Lord.” But it goes well beyond a spoken confession. We can’t simply say, “Jesus is Lord,” and go on about our day. This belief in resurrection guides our very lives, even during COVID-19. This pandemic hasn’t shut down our worship!

During this health crisis, we continue to find ways to worship. We generously increase our sharing fund accounts so that others have what they need. We find new ways to connect with one another. Nurses, doctors, chaplains and other healthcare professionals in our congregations show up for work. Others make facemasks. In these and many other acts we become witnesses to Christ's resurrection. Because of the witness of the disciples, including the doubting ones, we also bear witness to Christ.

A second artistic rendering of this morning's scripture is by Caravaggio.



The Incredulity of Saint Thomas by Caravaggio

The realism is rather captivating. The curiosity of Thomas and the two other disciples is fascinating. Take a moment to reflect on this image. (Pause)

The gaze of the disciples is endless. Their curiosity is captured in their furrowed brows. You wonder how long they stood there in awe, fascinated by the wound in his side, perhaps looking up at Jesus face, back down at his wound, up at his face, down at the wound. It's as if they are trying to figure this out. How can this be? Perhaps, after they have studied the wound long enough they will sit down with Jesus and ask more questions. Why did you go towards Jerusalem rather than stay in a safe place? Why did you not give a stronger defense when you were before Pilot and Herod? Why didn't God save you from the pain? What was it like being killed? What happened in the tomb? What does this mean?

As followers of Christ, we are indeed witnesses, proclaiming that Jesus is alive. We are also invited to be curious, to ask questions, to reflect on what happened, to take the pulse of the situation, to try to understand what is going on. This curiosity becomes a source of wisdom as questions are explored.

Sometimes I wonder if the church could benefit from a healthy dose of curiosity. Have we become complacent and satisfied with pat answers? Are we willing consumers in the polarizing politics of our time, taking sides in a dogma eat dogma world? Are we willing to explore in any detail the wounds within ourselves, within our families and in our communities?

One of the things we are discovering as we journey through COVID-19 is that vulnerable populations are experiencing the greatest devastation by this disease; the poor, the medically compromised, people of color, the ones lacking reliable healthcare, the aged, and others. The crisis is also exposing how quickly racism spreads as people of Asian ancestry are being targeted with hate speech and violence.

Like Jesus' words to Thomas, we are called to put our fingers on the wounds of our world. We are invited to be curious and ask why, according to Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot, "72% of people in Chicago who have died from COVID-19 are Black despite African Americans making up just 30% of the city's population."

Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite Disaster Service and Everence recently announced the creation of the COVID-19 Congregational Relief Fund. Talking about this fund, Mennonite Central Committee executive director, Ron Byler, stated, “The coronavirus disease and its accompanying impacts will disproportionately affect the most vulnerable populations, particularly those who are part of racial or ethnic communities. It’s imperative that we recommit ourselves to caring for our neighbors, acting generously, and sharing God’s love and compassion with all in the name of Christ.”

One of the ways we describe what it means to be part of a conference in the Central District is the emphasis we place on local congregational ministry. We trust that your local congregations is best able to discern God’s call for your community. And we give and receive counsel between congregations when we share one another’s ministry stories. So, what does it mean to proclaim “Jesus is Risen” in your community? Where are you seeing Christ alive and at work? Who is your neighbor? How are you experiencing healing and hope?

Imagine that the wounds of Christ are your own wounds and the wounds of the world. What do you see? Where are you drawn? What does it mean to reach out and touch, feel and massage these wounds?

This is not easy work. We are tempted to look away from the wounds and the brokenness, to embrace only the beautiful, the whole, the healed. Whether we are doing this work individually or as a community of faith, we are likely to find that touching wounds is not our natural impulse. It requires vulnerability, honesty and humility. Yet that is the invitation of Christ, “put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”

We are witnesses to the resurrection. We proclaim, “Jesus Christ is Lord!”

We are curious disciples. We put our fingers on the pulse of our communities. We are agents of God’s healing and hope. We touch our own wounds and the wounds of the world.

May resurrection hope strengthen us and lead us forward in joy! Amen.