

# Story and Meditation: Aching for a Touch

April 19, 2020

Second Sunday of Easter

John 20:19-31

by Eric Anderson

What goes through the mind of a seed? A seed doesn't have much of a mind, of course. It doesn't have a brain. It doesn't have anything to think with.

Still. A seed makes some decisions, doesn't it?

Why does a seed lie quietly for days and weeks and even years, and then suddenly open up? Why is it inactive one day and pushing down roots the next? What is the difference between yesterday's hard shell and today's soft green rising shoot?

Sometimes things make sense. A seed resting on the sidewalk usually doesn't do much. A seed in the soil with plenty of water opens up and starts to grow. But why does an ohia seed that falls into a crack in very new rock, with just a few grains of black sand, decide that's a good place to grow?

Sometimes, of course, it isn't. Sometimes the seed is wrong. This was a bad time, or a bad place to try to grow.

But how does it decide?

How do we decide what to believe about the world? How do we decide what to believe about God? The Scriptures tell us about the difficulty that one of Jesus' closest followers, the one called Thomas the Twin, had in choosing to believe what his friends told him: that Jesus was alive again.

Mind you, they'd been in the same situation just a few hours before. After a lot of early morning confusion and coming and going, Mary Magdalene had returned from the tomb with the word of Jesus' resurrection. "I have seen the Lord!" she told them. We don't really know how the remaining eleven of Jesus' twelve closest friends responded to this. My guess is that she did not find that they celebrated her words. My guess is that they doubted her, possibly even discounted her.

When he appeared to them that evening, after all, they seem to have hesitated. Jesus appeared. He wished them peace. "After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. *Then* the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord."

How did they decide what to believe? When they saw the risen Christ.

Thomas, it must be said, demanded more. For some reason that John does not supply us, Thomas was not with his friends that Sunday evening. He was somewhere else. He did not experience Jesus' visit. He did not see the risen Christ. He did not examine the wound inflicted on the crucifixion.

Cameron B. R. Howard writes at Working Preacher, "We say that Thomas doubts, but it seems to me that Thomas demands. He demands that Jesus show up for him, just like Jesus showed up for the other disciples. He demands that Jesus be present with him, too, so that the wave of resurrection hope may at last wash over him. Thomas' demand is less petulance or impudence than sheer honesty. He knows what it will take for him to believe this remarkable, ridiculous news, and he asks that Jesus provide that experience. Thomas needs to understand Jesus' resurrection not just in his brain or even in his heart, but in his body, with his senses, his whole self."

Thomas knew what it would take for him to believe.

He ached for a touch of Jesus.

This is our fifth online-only Sunday service. I'm very pleased that I've heard from members and friends that these have been worshipful, meaningful times of gathering with one another and with God. It is true, however, that I do look forward to meeting in person once again. I miss our united voices in song and in prayer. I miss seeing all of the faces in the congregation. I miss shaking your hands.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said last week that there were two things he would like to see continue when the COVID-19 outbreak is over. The first is that we continue to wash our hands well. The second is that we stop shaking hands. I'm pretty sure that he'd like to see us more restrained in offering hugs and kisses on the cheek, or the honi.

Absent a vaccine for this dangerous and contagious disease, he's right.

But.

I know that one of the things it will take for me to believe that we have regained our feet as a community and as a congregation is when we can touch one another again. I'm not quite as bold as Thomas. I don't need to place my finger in anyone's wounds, thank you. A handclasp, brief as it is, will be a miracle and it will be enough.

Touch. I am aching for a touch.

As Maren Tirabassi writes at Gifts in Open Hands,

Blessed are the ones, says Thomas,  
to those who listen to him  
this eastertide,  
who don't need a sanctuary to worship God...

Blessed are those who really touch  
even with gloves on,  
who really smile with a mask,  
who can be kind on Facetime or Zoom,  
who follow a livestream to find Jesus alive.

But also blessed is the Thomas  
in every one of us  
who acknowledges our longing  
to hold someone's real warm hand  
not just the story of a hand  
that reaches out to someone else,

and who wants to feel  
not Jesus long-ago bleeding side  
(we congratulate ourselves about that)  
but at least to feel side by side  
with other Christians  
in order to be side by side with Christ.

We are, many of us, I think, aching for a touch.

That might be what it takes for us to believe in a world risen from this pandemic again. Touch. Touch without fear for myself or the other. Touch that assures us once again of our common reality and our common humanity.

That may be some time coming. To be honest, I do not know when we will worship together in this sanctuary again. The current stay at home order expires on April 30<sup>th</sup>, but given the evidence that COVID-19 can spread rapidly as we've seen in Kona, I would guess that it will be extended. When we are gathering again, I expect that we will try to keep distant from one another. I think we will be bowing for greetings rather than extending our hands.

We'll have our sight but not our touch. So will we believe?

As it happened, Thomas was wrong. He didn't need to touch to believe. He just needed to see and hear, or so it seems from John's gospel. If we're reading this right, Jesus invited Thomas to touch him, but it doesn't sound like he did. Just those words was enough to prompt Thomas to say, "My Lord and my God!"

The seed, without a brain or a mind, decides when to grow. We human beings in the midst of stress and anxiety make our guesses about what will make everything all right again. When the truth of resurrection breaks into us, we learn whether we were right about that or not even as we learn that what we yearned for is also true.

As Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Joy J. Moore writes at Working Preacher, "The whole of this is neither about phantom appearance nor even a doubting disciple. It is how to tell of a world when the divine shows up in disaster. It is how to tell of a world when forgiveness is forever possible. It is how to tell of a world when a woman's witness welcomes wonder. It is how to tell of a world when life is to know the God whose mission is to forgive sins and reconcile communities scattered by oppression. There are many stories to be told, but these stories confirm Jesus' identity as the one who has the divine prerogatives to give life and exercise God's rule."

Aching for a touch, we strive to trust in the ancient witness: Jesus lives. He lives for us.

Amen.