

Touch me, Again

Luke 24:36-48

Rev J Shannon

Early in my career, I returned to university and retrained as a teacher.

We learned very early that there are 3 kinds of learners in the world. Those that need to *see* things for themselves; those that need to hear stories and those who need to either physically touch and manipulate an object or internalise it – *feel* it physically or emotionally. Which do you think Thomas was?

For visual learners – we have icons, stained glass, video clips, picture books and yes, altar decorations. For listeners, we have stories, sermons, poetry and music. Often you can pick listeners in church because their eyes are closed but they aren't snoring. For the 3rd group (which we call psycho-kinetic),¹ communion is often the most important spiritual moment. That is a time when you can touch and taste your faith – and internalise it.

Worship tries to softly speak 3 languages at the same time so there is something for everyone. Something that touches each person in a way that makes sense to them. The theory explains why some people are more Bible focussed and other are more action oriented. We are all Martha's and Mary's to some degree.

When I first arrived in Merimbula, I noticed there are two kinds of beach walkers. Those who walk above the tide line and those who walk just on the water's edge and let the waves wash over their feet.

It made me think. I thought perhaps there were two types of church goers. Those who are here to listen but may not necessarily be comfortable being touched by God – that's a little **too** intimate....

and those who want the words and experience to wash over their souls and seep into dark places – like surf through the sand.

Now I think there may be three – somewhere among us (or even more on Main street), is Thomas. Someone who loves God a little and would like to love Him more but...after all that has happened², is unsure. Questions remain like

¹ We had a child like that. You couldn't say, 'don't touch that it will burn'. She wouldn't believe you. She *had* to touch it. If it wasn't personal experience, then it wasn't credible.

² Doubt raised from the crucifixion, the death, the history of the church, personal experience, rejection, what's happening in the world today, etc. etc.

flotsam left by upheaving events. They might ask, If He is a healer – why not heal me?

If he is so mighty, why did he die? Why is there still evil in the world?

Val Webb says “thank you” to doubt. It is what makes us chew on our faith. Test it, if you like, as we said that ‘temptation’ really means ‘test’. Putting your faith to test makes it more sure-footed than just accepting what we are told. It is in this testing that we realise, God was not sent to heal us but to make us stronger.

“Humans live in a democracy of vulnerability. We are alike in our susceptibility to pain and loss. We are equal in our capacity for hope and heroism.

This is the message of the cross and the empty tomb. God is on the side of the boy on the gallows and the man on the cross. Even amid horror, some vital purpose is making itself known.

“The Christian faith does not set out a philosophy explaining the problem of evil. It responds, instead, with a person. It answers an experience of pain with an experience of pain. It offers the fellowship of suffering. In the process, it gives permission for grief, outrage, even despair. Yet it also raises the prospect of a dramatic reversal. A hope on the far side of anguish. A homecoming on the far side of death. An assurance that the violent will not inherit the earth.

There is no good and bad in these positions – it is simply how we are made.”³

Thomas was not an unbeliever – he was a passionate follower of Jesus, yet this what he is remembered for. He is *not* remembered as the one willing to risk his life to go with Jesus to Bethany when Lazarus died. (John 11:1-8). He is *not* the one remembered as saying at the last supper, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”.... And Jesus counters with, ‘I am the way, the truth and the life...’ (John 14:5-7)...a saying that *you* know very well.

Rev John Squires posed an interesting imaginative scenario. What if Thomas was the one who didn’t need proof. That is. The crucifixion story actually ends with ‘the Tomb was empty’. The disciples scattered. Some, scared for their lives and bewildered by the ‘end’, locked themselves in an upper room. They

³ Michael Gerton, Washington Post, “Where is God” 19 April 22

don't know what to do. They were ready to spend their lives devoted to existing followers, preaching safely to the converted.

Thomas was not there. Maybe he was out in the world living his faith, in the full gaze of a dangerous and antagonistic society. In other words, Jesus, the man, the teachings, the word from God was enough for him. He got on with it – not needing more signs. He's out there, preaching.

Of course, this is imagination – we don't know why Thomas wasn't there⁴. But if it was true, he had every reason to be sceptical of an 'appeared' Jesus. Or maybe, he was just an experiential learner.

The thing many people missed the most during COVID was touch. We longed to hug each other. Now we are in the new world that's endemic (always with us) rather than pandemic – passing through. We are wary of touch. We are trained to be socially distant. Shaking hands is not automatic anymore. Now it presents an awkward moment...do I? Don't I?

We have learned to touch and be touched in new ways. And we have returned to some pretty old customs. The casserole on the porch is a hug. We pick up the phone or face time more often. Facebook, FaceTime and What's App are part of our daily lives. COVID helped people reach out to old friends and make new contact circles. Touch is no longer confined to physical contact. We are touched by videos (sometimes on the funny bone) and we share them by messenger and email.

I can imagine the disciples locked in fear in that upper room. How would it play out on zoom? Would Thomas have phoned in?

I have spent the last few days watching my son run a virtual family. It had been a couple of months since they were all in the same country together. They are a family of 4. Previously 1 (or two) was in the USA and 1 (or 2) in Singapore and one in Oz in school. Parent-teacher interviews this week were on the web, 3 ways in 2 countries – and different time zones. To me, this an obvious road to madness but some-how they juggle it, for a while.

But the lack of intimacy ultimately erodes. Anyone who is aging away from family can tell you that. The touch of a hand *can* bring tears of joy but at the same time, we are re-defining intimacy and touch.

⁴ What we do know is that Thomas went on to India and led a long and fruitful mission from Goa to Chennai converting many souls and his presence is still marked today.

Think back when courting took place over months and years and was done by correspondence. Many say people knew each other better for having had time, space and the written word. How those love letters were read and read again until the eyes almost peeled the ink from the page.

So, time and distance had an impact on early faith. There was a distinct gap between those who witnessed and those who came later. People who only heard about it.

In John's gospel, it is clear that people are led to faith with different experiences and different degrees of evidence. John's gospel is especially written for those removed by time and space. It is an alternative experience to eye-witnessing – just as zoom can be an alternative hug.

While the passage is about Thomas, it includes a special blessing for those who have *not* seen and yet believe. It is meant to be inclusive and bridge the gap between the witnessing community and those who came later – giving them equal status.

Putting Jesus' words and actions into writing helped those who had not experienced his teaching first-hand to become believers. It creates a community around the text. In other words, it makes us a people of the Book. People can witness through textual experience and as it is in that shared experience that we become one – a community.

It is also why Biblical literacy is so important to the church.

John's Gospel is a text to consolidate and explain what happened and what it meant. It was the last of the Gospel's written and probably dates to around 90 years after Jesus' death. Each of the disciples witnessing the events would surely have grappled with trauma and mystery in their own way. Each would have processed it according to their personalities or 'learning styles' and this Gospel, like the others carries a unique perspective. Each tried to explain, 'Who is the resurrected Jesus?' The Easter event is an inscrutable experience in the life of the church. It is mysterious and has different realities for different people and is experienced differently by different people.

The appearance stories describe 'the various initiatives Jesus takes to confront his followers' scepticism in such a way as to pique our interest and remind us

that these theological questions are not peculiarly ours'.⁵ It happened then and it happens now.

In other words, so many of us are doubting Thomas. We shouldn't feel bad. We need to grapple with faith through difference senses. It is the same with God. If I asked you 'what is God like?', I would get 30 different descriptions. If I asked you, 'when do you experience God?', some would say through text, others would say stories and still others would look to nature for physical sensations: breezes, sunsets, water...

The part of this text that speaks to me is when Jesus says 'put your finger here'; 'reach out your hand' – the invitation to *be* touched, to be entered,

'put it into my side' he says

That is breathtakingly open, invitational.

Here, now! Experience!!!

'Touch me', he says. Metaphorically teaching us to say 'touch me, Lord' – I am inviting you as you have invited me.

I pray: Mystery is only available to me when I feel it. Lord, let me feel it and in doing so, may I once again, unite my being in yours. Touch me, Lord. I am here. I am not afraid. Amen

⁵ *Texts for preaching*, Brueggemann, Cousar et al p, 294
IBID – p295