

Easter 2 2020

John 20:19-31

Doubtless you have heard this before:

Our faith is most accessible,
Best understood,
Most easily enters the heart
When it comes to us as story.

A story of flesh and blood.
A story of pure, unbounded love
Choosing to pour the divine self
Into the act of creation.
Love cradling the dust of earth
And breathing life into it –
Making us, in the image of love,
to delight and break the divine heart.
Love becoming our flesh and blood,
Creating an unbreakable bond
Between us and the ground of all being.

All the great faiths yearn towards this heart of love.
All the great faiths offer ways of connecting.
All speak the truth of divine love.

Our way, the Christian way,
Offers this truth, this way:
Love becomes flesh and blood
In the person of Jesus.

There is no Christianity without this truth.
You can wonder how it happened,
You can have doubts.
Trust me, you are not alone if you do.
But the realness at the heart of the matter is this:
Love became human in the person of Jesus.

Love was born as one of us.
Jesus embodied love in his living
And in his dying.

And now he lives again, forever.
He is really present,
Right now, here,

As truly as he was then.
You can wonder how it happens,
And you can have doubts.
None of that has to keep you
From entering today's story,
And seeing what you find there,
This year.

Who is Thomas, who doubts until he touches?
What can he show us now,
In this time of social distancing,
Of separation,
Of longing?

Thomas, who had to touch,
In order to accept the truth.

Thomas, who needed to touch
To know that his friend and teacher
Was God.

We have a strange relationship with Thomas.
For some, there's a sense of pride
In identifying with him,
A need to hold on to a skepticism like his.

For some, there's a sense of satisfaction
That comes from the perceived blessedness
Of believing without needing to see.

Maybe you find yourself
Among the skeptics.
Maybe you find yourself
Among those who don't need to see.

And maybe this story has never been very important to you.
Until now.

But now,
In this time of separation,
Thomas's need to see, to touch,
Taps into our own need.

Our need for community.
Our need to taste and see that God is good.

Christianity, it has been said,
Is the most materialistic of all the religions. *
Our faith happens in the flesh.

Thomas is voicing what is true for all of us.
We need to touch to know what is real.

Jesus knew this about us,
Because he was one of us,
Lived our experience through his senses.
He knew this about us,
Because he was God,
Knowing us through and through.

And so he gave us a great gift,
The gift of himself,
Really present in bread and wine,
Taken, blessed, broken and shared
For the life of the world.

But now,
Like Thomas,
We are not in the room
When the mystery comes to life.

We cannot touch,
So how can we know?

We have been assured,
And we have promised,
That Jesus is with us in the bread and wine.
And now, there is no bread, no wine.
Or so it seems.

This is a time of crisis.
The pandemic, with all its fear –
Of death, of economic collapse,
Of societal disarray,
Of inability and lack of will
To care for the most vulnerable,
This crisis threatens to shake our lives
Down to the roots.

And in the midst of all this,
We are kept from the blessing,
The comfort, the inspiration

We would receive from the sacrament.
Another burden added to the heaviness of the crisis.

Can this story, of Thomas who needs to touch,
Offer us something more in this time,
Than it ever has before?

Remember, this story too comes from a time of crisis.
A crisis for the community of faith.

This story comes from the community
That gathered around the beloved disciple,
Who lay in Jesus' embrace at that last meal,
When Jesus said to his friends,
This is my body,
This is my blood.
Whenever you do this,
I am with you.

That community,
Like all the followers of Jesus,
Believed that he would soon return
To usher in the promised time,
When God's commonwealth of love and justice
Would spread over the whole world.

But he was not returning,
And those who had known him,
Had touched him,
Seen him in the flesh,
Were dying one by one.
Soon there were none left.

The faithful needed to know
That their experience of the risen Lord
Was still real, still valid,
Still enough to carry them through the storms of life.
And so this story reassured them:
Those who have not seen,
And still believe,
Are just as blessed.

If they could live through that,
Carry the blessing of the good news to the ends of the earth,
Make disciples of all nations,
Baptizing,

Taking, blessing, breaking, and sharing the bread and wine
As he had done,
If they could do that,
We can do this.
They learned to trust without seeing.
We too can learn.

Like them,
We can live through this time of doubt.
We can sustain ourselves with virtual worship,
Virtual community,
Using our eyes and ears and minds and hearts
To bridge the gaps that have opened up
In all our lives.

But we cannot touch without touching.
We cannot eat without eating.
We cannot smell without smelling.
These senses are completely bound up in our flesh,
Unlike seeing and hearing.
There is no virtual Eucharist.
It is the essential sign
Of God's willingness to be embodied,
To die, to live again for us
And with us and through us.
It is God's continual sign
That the realness, the stuff of life
Is where the holy happens.

There is no virtual Eucharist.
But there is real hope.

Yes, there is the simple hope that this time will pass.
But there is a broader, deeper, truer hope.

Whatever your doubts,
Hold on to this:
God has no limits.
There is no social distancing that can keep God
From coming to get us where we live.

If you long for the Eucharist,
Hold on to memory and maintain hope.
God will not leave you comfortless.

If the sight of the bread and wine

Is a touchstone for you,
Engage the practice of making a spiritual communion,
Focusing on the image of the sacrament.
There are prayers and pictures to guide you
In expressing your longing.
And that longing conveys a blessing.

Know, too, that our prayer offices,
Like the one we share this morning,
Can keep your heart and mind ready and willing
To receive the gift when it comes again.

Know that you are in solidarity with many who have gone before us,
Those who were prevented from receiving the bread and wine,
Sometimes for years.
Some of them grew weary on the road.
Others kept their longing fresh.
God was present to all of them,
Whether known or not.

Nothing can keep God out of your heart,
If you invite the holy mystery of love to come in.
Yes, bread and wine convey the presence
And the mystery of the living God.
But God will always find a way.

Thomas needed to see and touch,
And we do too.
There is no need to regret that,
Or try to make it go away.
But there is a need,
As there has been so often for the people of God,
To wait.

It will happen again.
You will be there when Jesus enters again.
He will breathe peace on you,
Let you touch him,
Take him into your self and your soul.
And then he will send you out
To be his flesh and blood in the world.

This is his promise,
And the promise will not fail.

*Archbishop Temple

Coda:

...how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any-lifted from the no
of all nothing-human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?...

e.e.cummings