

SERMON—SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER
19 April 2020

Will you pray with me?

God, whether because of my words or in spite of them, may your word be spoken. And whether we come with willing hearts or with stubborn ones, help us to receive. Amen.

I love using the sign of the cross in worship and in personal prayer. I use it much less in public worship at Los Altos UMC because many people find it confusing. But I don't think the Catholic church gets to have a monopoly on the sign of the cross. The cross, for all Christians, is a sign of redemption in and through Jesus Christ. It's an outward act that professes an inward faith in the triune God. It declares that through my baptism, I belong to God.

I particularly like the tradition of making a small cross over the forehead, lips, and heart before the reading of the gospel. It is a reminder and a prayer—that what is about to be read might pierce our mind, our lips and our hearts.

And I am a person who really needs this, because I am a person who is really good at loving God with my mind. But I'm not always great and loving God with my heart and strength. In the book of Deuteronomy, God gives the Israelites what is known as the great commandment:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your being, and all your strength.

This then gets reiterated in the gospels when Jesus is asked about the greatest commandment in the law. And I think this is important, but I often catch myself making loving God an intellectual exercise. I need to be reminded that my heart **AND** my body are a part of this too. And so, for me, making the sign of the cross is a way of doing a physical act that helps me connect my body to my love of God. Because, even though I need to be reminded sometimes, my physical body matters along with my mind.

We see that expressed clearly in the section of John we heard read earlier. Our reading comes just after the disciples were gathered behind closed doors out of fear and Jesus came and stood among them. Like, the guy who had just been killed a few days earlier showed up and stood there and told them, "Peace be with you." And then he showed them his hands and his side and breathed the Holy Spirit on them. But Thomas wasn't there, so when they tell him what happened, Thomas says, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, put my finger in the wounds left by the nails, and put my hand into his side, I won't believe."

And that's the part that people tend to hang onto. Thomas saying, "Prove it." I think today's equivalent would be "Pics or it didn't happen." Thomas says, "Yeah yeah yeah, I won't believe it until I see it." You may have even heard him called "Doubting Thomas." But really, Thomas is only asking for the same thing that the other disciples have received—assurance. Thomas lived life with this guy, Thomas was among his 12 closest friends. And then he saw him taken captive and killed. And Thomas knows as well as the rest of the disciples—dead guys stay dead. So it's fairly understandable that he needs a little assurance that the one who is resurrected is the

same one who suffered and died. He needs to see his hands and his side, because he needs to know that it's the same body. Because our bodies are intricately tied to our persons. AND, because if Jesus was truly human, his body would have to show the marks of this human life.

For centuries people have argued whether the resurrection of Jesus is a bodily resurrection or a spiritual resurrection. There are plenty of folks who will argue that the *idea* of Jesus was resurrected. That the values that Jesus shared and the radical message he brought lived on, and that this is a *real* resurrection, but not a bodily one. Others argue that it is a bodily resurrection; that, through the power of God, Jesus' actual body lived again—not in a zombie Jesus kind of way, but in a way that he became the very embodiment of death's defeat and God's victory in love.

Here in the gospel of John, we have this story of Jesus appearing to the disciples, showing his hands and his side to them, letting them look at his physical body. And it makes sense that it's here in the gospel of John. Do you remember how the gospel of John begins?

In the beginning was the Word
and the Word was with God
and the Word was God.

And a few verses later in that beginning chapter:

The Word became flesh
and made his home among us.

The flesh of God, this idea that God chose to become *fully human*, to live a human life, matters. Because, at the end of the day, at least from my theological perspective, my body and my spirit can't be two separate things. My spiritual existence resides in my body. My spirit and my flesh are intricately connected. They exist together. Our bodies are tied to our spirits. Our emotions cause physical reactions in our bodies. When our mind senses that we are in danger, it sends us into a fight, flight, or freeze reaction. When we experience sadness, our tear ducts well up. When we are nervous or anxious our palms sweat, and our heartrate increases. When we exercise our mood is more manageable.

Now, granted, our emotions are not the same thing as our spirits. But we have physical responses to emotional *and* spiritual experiences. Our bodies matter. Which I think is why, after Thomas says, "Look, I hear you guys, but I need to see him for myself, I need to touch the marks in his hands and his side," Jesus presents *exactly* that opportunity. Jesus shows up and says, "Thomas, here they are, touch and feel and believe." "Look," says Jesus, "my real and physically embodied life is connected to my real and physical resurrection." Jesus gives Thomas the assurance that his actual body has been resurrected and that the scars and marks of his real and human life have not magically disappeared.

Jesus offers his wounds to Thomas. This God of ours not only chose to become flesh and dwell among us but chose to live a real and human life—to take on the pain, the suffering, the hope, the heartache and the joy of humanity—but also chose to live that life even into death. And

when hell and death had done their best, God declares that they are not enough to hold back the love that God has for us. And Jesus shows up and shows Thomas his wounds and shows him that his body matters. And that the scars of his suffering live right alongside the glory of his resurrection.

The body's life, the body's health matters. And it matters not only to us, but to God.

Jesus' scars have not disappeared, the body still bears the existence of his humanity. And we too get to receive the assurance that Thomas received:

Assurance that our pain and suffering, even the anxiety we carry in our bodies, is not separate from the experience of resurrection. We can hold in our bodies the brokenness of our lives AND the re-remembering. In this time of uncertainty, we can hold the assurance that our actual bodies matter, that the resurrection is possible even as we carry our marks and our scars. In this time when we long to be able to be physically present with one another, we are reminded that God longs for that too.

Your life matters to God—your spiritual life and your physical life. God cares about you in this insane time of global pandemic. And God cares not only about your spirit and your spiritual development, but about your physical body.

But God also gets it, we need some assurance.

And so, even if we missed the first appearance, God will give us what we need. Jesus will show up again, maybe in different ways, and show us what we need to see. Jesus is offering you his hands and his side. "Look, I'm here. Touch and see. My body matters and so does yours." And Jesus speaks the words we need to hear in this time:

Peace be with you.