

## First-Hand Knowledge

John 20:24-31

May 1, 2022 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC  
Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

Do you remember the first time we worshiped together outdoors, after we had been apart for so long? We were all duly spaced six feet apart, sitting in the meadow, masked. At the beginning of the service, during announcements, I asked us all to take off our masks for just a moment and look around to see the faces we had been longing to see. It brought a tear to my eye. It was hard for us to be distanced from each other's smiles and frown lines and tears. We missed just seeing each other.

Even harder for me has been the need not to touch one another. Just the simple touch on the shoulder to say I care about you. Or shaking hands when I meet someone new. I still miss holding hands with the choir as we pray together before each service. I miss standing shoulder-to-shoulder. Even now, when masks can sometimes be blessedly gone, we have not gone back to easily sharing our care for one another through touch. Even though this distance from skin to skin is for our own safety, I still miss being able to gently, appropriately touch. My hands know that something is missing here.

Newborns bond to their mothers through touch. Lying skin-to-skin on their mother's chest immediately after delivery, babies come to trust the love and care they will receive in that relationship. When little children scrape their knees, they want a hug more than a bandage. Bedtime stories are lovelier when they are accompanied by a gentle pat or a tousled head before sleep. We share something of ourselves through our hands. Touch reminds us that we are really, physically present with one another.

Our skin carries memories for us. It remembers the touch of a loved one, the pleasure of a first kiss, or the pain of an injury. Scars are the most obvious examples of this, places where a hurt is healed, perhaps, but not forgotten by our skin. We carry past traumas in our whole bodies, not just in our minds. And sometimes, our bodies will insist that we remember those traumas, even when our minds would rather forget.

Often, when we read today's scripture about Thomas, we feel a little superior to him. Even Jesus says that we are blessed because we believe without having seen Jesus in person. But I think we, who have been told not to touch for a while, should not look down on Thomas. Instead, we should have some fellow-feeling for the disciple whose hands missed the touch of his friend, who would not believe Jesus was risen until he felt the wounds in his hands and his side. We know how much our hands would tell us if we could only let them, so we should appreciate Thomas's insistence.

For him, hearing that Jesus was risen was not enough. Even seeing Jesus in the room would not suffice. Only his hands could convince him. Only "first-hand" knowledge would do. Thomas needed to know with his own hands that Jesus was well and truly present, physically present, even after the cross, even after the grave.

Thomas wanted not just to hold Jesus' hand or touch his cheek or stand shoulder-to-shoulder with him, but to feel the scars from Jesus' brutal death. He needed to know that the one who appeared before him, the one who was risen from the dead, was truly the same one who had suffered, that he still carried in his resurrected body the memory of his own suffering.

Jesus' death was still vivid and painful to Thomas, who had only watched it from afar. And he needed to know that the physical memory of that awful death was not something Jesus would simply put aside in his resurrected self. Thomas needed to know that Jesus' skin had not forgotten the cross, because Thomas himself could not forget it.

Paul tells us that our resurrected bodies will not be like our earthly bodies, and scripture shows us that after the Resurrection, Jesus appears in ways that are sometimes recognizable as his old self and sometimes not. Mary Magdalene needs to hear the voice of her friend and teacher, so Jesus appears to her on Easter morning as a gardener, but she recognizes his voice when he calls her by name. It is that voice that she carries in her heart.

On the road to Emmaus, Jesus' followers do not recognize him at all, until they invite him in for dinner and watch him breaking bread. Something about the way he breaks the bread has spoken to their hearts before, and so their hearts recognize it again.

It is Jesus' suffering that has spoken to Thomas's heart, and so Jesus comes to him as the suffering servant, the one crucified, with scars that Thomas can feel for himself.

Today, we live by faith and not by sight, as Paul says. Nevertheless, we are here because, like Thomas, we have some first-hand knowledge of the risen Christ, Christ who has come to us in the way that our own hearts can recognize. And so, I ask each of us, how do we know that Christ is present with us? How do our hearts know to recognize him? It will be different for each of us. What evidence is so indisputable to us that we are ready to say, as Thomas does, "My Lord and my God"?

I know Christ through my grandmother's firm and unwavering conviction that I belong to God. That is a deep and certain knowledge that I will always carry in my heart.

But I also see Christ's presence in loving relationships here in this church. My heart hears Christ in beautiful music, sung to honor him. I feel his sacred presence in the sensual experience of bread and cup.

What about you? How do you recognize him in your life? How does he come to you, that speaks to your heart?

We are the gathered Body of Christ in this world. When we see each other, deeply and truly, as Christ sees us, then we will all feel known by him. When we treat one another with love and care, we honor his presence. When we reach out to the world to care for others in his name, then he is there in ways that others may also recognize.

Thomas needs to feel the physical presence of Christ's body, to touch the wounds of his suffering, in order to believe. Others may need to taste the food we donate to the food pantry or open the envelope that contains the card with our good wishes. We can't just be theoretically present for others, we have to give them something to touch, something that they need, something their heart will recognize, in order to be the presence of Christ for them. And sometimes we need to show them our wounds in order for them to see Christ in us.

It is an awesome responsibility to be the Body of Christ today, to be the imperfect, wounded, broken body of the living Christ. Yet we are the ones he has called to this task, and the world is crying out for his touch. May our hearts always recognize that cry and share Christ's love with all who seek it.

Amen