

John 20:19-31

It seems quite appropriate that the author of our Gospel text also penned the words of our Epistle for today. John was there behind those locked doors when Jesus came and stood among them. He was there a week later, Thomas now with them, as Jesus again came to them. And John tells it the way it was in our Epistle: *“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands...”* Jesus’ disciples did all these things. They heard Jesus, they saw Him, and they touched Him...after His resurrection. It’s what He wanted. *“See My hands and feet,”* He tells them, as recorded by St. Luke, *“that it is I Myself. Touch Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.”*

We can picture this scene on that Easter evening. Ten of the disciples flocking around Jesus. Each of them coming up to Him, wide-eyed, reaching out with their hands, grasping Him, feeling Him, putting their fingers into the nail marks in His hands, kneeling down to touch the nail marks in His feet, reaching out to feel His side where the spear had pierced Him through. Yes, this is Jesus! This is no apparition. It’s really Him!

These grown men would have been acting like little children; children who haven’t seen their mommy in a long time. “Is it really you?” “Yes, it’s really me!” Hugging, kissing, falling upon each other with tears of joy.

This is the wonderful scene on Easter evening, because it’s not enough, then, just to hear Jesus’ words. It’s not enough to see Him. They have to touch Him. They have to hold Him. And as they do, their hearts leap for joy.

There is a progression here. It’s how it is in life. When you hear a noise, you look to see what it is. When someone speaks, you turn toward the person. But if you’re not sure; if it’s dark, or things are unclear to your eyes, you move toward the person; you get closer. And the last of our senses, the sense of touch, you then use to affirm what you hear with your ears and see with your eyes.

Seeing is not believing. On Easter evening touching is; grasping, holding. When a mother gives birth and the doctor says, “You have a healthy baby boy,” and holds him up for her to see, that’s not good enough. She wants to touch his skin. She desires to hold his little body. She needs to hug him close to herself; to feel his warmth; to have his heart beating next to her own.

This is what Jesus wanted for His disciples, and it’s what He wants for you. No one is to be excluded. Thomas is not demanding too much when he wants to touch Jesus. “Unless I...place my finger into the mark of the nails...” he says. And he should; he must. He is an apostle; one who is sent out with the good news of the resurrection. How can he give a first-hand account, as an apostle, unless he hears, and sees, and touches Jesus?

Do you have doubts? Is there some nagging unbelief lurking in your heart, in your mind? The disciples disbelieved, writes St. Luke. Thomas said, not that he doubted, but that he did not believe. This is natural. It’s human. When we hear incredulous news in any aspect of life, our first reaction is to doubt and disbelieve what we hear. “There’s no way!” we might reply, “I can’t believe it!”

And so it is not a natural thing to embrace the Christian Faith. It is supernatural. It is of God. To believe that God is triune; that He became one of us; that He willingly suffered and died for us and for all sinners; that He rose from the dead, and that we have life eternal in Him - no one can believe such incredulous things unless God makes it happen within us.

But we do not have blind faith. Our faith grasps things that are real; things that we can hear with our ears, see with our eyes, and touch with our hands.

But be careful. For the devil is always seeking to direct our senses to that which is not of God. He directs us to our feelings, to our experiences, to dreams and to visions - our own, and those of others. Satan would have us

use our ears, eyes, and hands to grasp and hold onto things that are mere shadows. But a shadow has no substance.

And so the Holy Spirit inspired John to write these words for us: *“These (signs) are written so that you may believe.”* You were not there on Easter evening. You were not there a week later when Thomas cried, *“My Lord and my God!”* But these men were. And so their ears are your ears. Their eyes are your eyes. Their hands are your hands. They hear Jesus speak words from His own mouth for themselves and also for you. They see Jesus for themselves and they see Him for you. And they touch Jesus. They grasp Him and handle Him. They feel His skin, His warmth, His beating heart. And their hands are your hands so that you believe on their account by the working of the Holy Spirit within you. *“Unless I see...Unless I touch...”* says Thomas. And he did. And so do you through his eyes and hands.

But even more, Jesus gives your faith something very real and of substance to grasp and hold. John writes that Jesus breathed on His disciples and gave them authority to forgive sins. And then He sends them out baptizing and distributing His body and blood in the Sacrament.

Here in Holy Baptism Jesus comes, as He came on Easter evening, and He grasps you; He holds you. In baptism He puts your little beating heart next to His own. He pours water from the spear mark in His side out over your tiny head. And He puts faith in your heart to believe that He who is risen from the dead is your dear Lord and Savior, and that you are His own.

And here in Holy Communion He puts His words of substance in your ears, *“This is My body...My blood...given and shed for you.”* He puts His Sacrament before your eyes to see and behold. He bids you, *“Touch Me and see that it is I Myself,”* and you hold within your very grasp Him who died for you and who now lives for you. Every time we gather as Jesus’ disciples before His altar, it is Easter evening, and Jesus comes and stands among us. We touch Him in His Sacrament. We see by faith the nail marks in His hands and feet. *“For you,”* He says, *“these holy wounds I suffered for you.”* And He breathes out upon us His word of forgiveness.

Oh how we need that word! We are poor sinners. We are straying sheep, and not one of us would make it to heaven. We would doubt and disbelieve, and sin would overtake us. But this is why Jesus came to His disciples on Easter evening. And it’s why He comes to our little gathering today. He comes as your risen Lord and speaks His word of peace into your ears. He comes to breathe out His word of forgiveness for you. And that word no one can take from you. It is yours to grasp and cling to even unto your dying breath. You are forgiven...every one of you. And Jesus comes to gather you close to Himself. In Word and in Sacrament He wants you to hear and know the loving sound of His heart beating for you.

In this way Jesus keeps you as part of the little group of His disciples until the end. That group is scattered now. Some are already in heaven with Jesus. Some of us are with Jesus here. But when that final Easter evening comes, we will all be together with the Lord, and what joy that day will bring.

For now it is enough to hear the good news that our loved ones in Christ are in heaven. But the day is coming when hearing will not be enough. For when that last Easter evening comes, we will see our Lord, we will touch Him as His disciples did, we will place our fingers into the marks in His hands and feet, we will fall upon Him as children fall upon their dear mommy and daddy. And we will fall upon each other. You will see your loved ones. You will embrace them and they will embrace you. Oh the tears of joy that will be shed on that day, and that day will have no end. *“He is risen! (He is risen indeed!) Alleluia!”* Amen.