

THE ULTIMATE TOUCH

John 20:1-18

What is it about Easter?

A sermon preached by
Rev. Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves
First United Methodist Church
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Some people just have the touch. They have a gift or a talent that sets them apart and makes them better than everyone else. Sometimes the touch is athletic. We saw several basketball players with the touch during March Madness. You can see some golfers with the touch if you watch the Master's final round today. Sometimes the touch is artistic. Some people can sing a song or play an instrument in a way that just moves your soul. Sometimes it's a culinary touch. Some people can make something delicious out of anything, or they can take an ordinary recipe and make something gourmet out of it. Some people have a horticultural touch—what we call a “green thumb.” They can make anything grow, and their yards and gardens look like magazines. Or some people have a “Midas touch,” the ability to make money or financial decisions that always turn out profitable. Some people just have a touch.

We've been talking through Lent this year about the touch of Jesus. Our sermons have been around the theme “Close Enough To Touch.” We have re-visited some great encounters that Jesus had along the way; there was Satan himself, Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob, the man born blind, and Lazarus, who was dead until Jesus got a hold of him. In all of these stories, the close personal encounter with Jesus was a defining moment. In fact, the touch of Jesus changed everything.

So today we are hearing again the most personal and perhaps the most touching of the resurrection stories. There is lots of running and crying, and then Jesus appears and has a one-on-one conversation with Mary Magdalene. All of this surrounds a life-giving touch by God. Jesus was dead, and by the power of God, he was made alive again. From death to life—that changed everything.

What is it about Easter? Why do we make a special effort to come hear this story over and over again, year after year? It's a major holiday. You can buy lots of Easter stuff—candy, flowers, new clothes, rabbits. It's a worldwide celebration for some 2 billion Christians around the globe. Easter is a fascinating phenomenon. But why? What is it about Easter that touches us so deeply? Here's a hint: it's not the bunnies and eggs.

I think we are touched by the story. The details are a little different in the four Gospels, but in all four official versions of the life of Jesus, the resurrection is the climax of the

story. This event is what sets Jesus apart from all the rest. There were other teachers in first century Palestine. There were even other miracle workers. But there was nobody who had been killed by crucifixion and returned from the dead.

In John, it is only Mary Magdalene who comes to the tomb early on Easter morning. There is no mention of burial spices in John. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus had taken care of the burial. I'm sure Mary was just coming to mourn. She loved Jesus; he had touched her life so completely that the Gospel of Luke says she had seven demons cast out of her.¹ "Seven demons" means Mary was totally messed up. But Jesus healed her body and soul. Judging by the number of mentions she gets in the Gospels and in later Christian tradition, she became the most important female disciple Jesus had. So it's not surprising that she came to grieve the death of her Lord.

But then an unexpected thing happened. The stone that had been rolled in front of the entrance to the tomb was gone, and so was Jesus. In shock, Mary ran to tell Peter and John, who ran back to the tomb to see for themselves. They entered the tomb and saw the burial cloths that had wrapped Jesus' body, but there was no body there. In John, there were no angels sitting there, either, to tell them the good news. Perplexed and confused, Peter and John left and went back home.

But Mary stayed, weeping beside the tomb. She looked into the tomb, and then she saw the two angels. They must have been male angels, because they asked her a painfully obvious question: Why are you crying? Why did they think she was crying? "*They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.*"² Mary turned around, and Jesus was standing there, but maybe because of the darkness, or maybe because of her expectations, she didn't recognize him.

Proving that he was a man, too, Jesus asked a question that had already been asked and answered, "Why are you weeping?" Mary thought this stranger must have been the gardener, so she turned back to the tomb and pleaded, "*Sir, [literally, Lord] if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.*"³ All it took was a word from Jesus: "*Mary.*" That voice! Mary turned. That face! "*Rabbouni!*" she cried. "Teacher!"

Jesus told Mary not to hold on to him, because I'm sure she wrapped him up in a big hug, but he said to go and tell everyone. Mary ran back to where the disciples were, her feet much lighter than when she had run that route only a little while earlier, and she announced the good news of Easter, "*I have seen the Lord!*"⁴

We love that story, and it touches our hearts every time. But we also love the history of Easter. Scholars have called the death and resurrection of Jesus the "hinge point of history." Truly, everything before was leading up to this victorious moment. Everything after it looks back to it for meaning. Why are we sitting here in the year 2023 today? Because time itself is measured by the life of Jesus. The course of western civilization was altered by this life. Over a quarter of the humans alive today give some allegiance to the lordship of Jesus.

The poem, *One Solitary Life*, chronicles the humble beginnings and the apparent defeat of Jesus, but then ends with these words: "Nineteen (now twenty) centuries have come and gone, and today Jesus is the central figure of the human race and the leader of [hu]mankind's progress. All the armies that have ever marched, all the navies that have ever sailed, all the parliaments that have ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned, put

together, have not affected the life of [hu]mankind on earth as powerfully as that one solitary life.”⁵

The story of Jesus is the ultimate come-from-behind, underdog victory. It’s the 16th seed defeating the number 1 seed in the NCAA tournament. It’s the hole-in-one that wins the Masters. It’s the “Star-Spangled Banner” played on the last morning of Woodstock. We love this story!

But mostly we love the love behind the story. The resurrection of Jesus is purely and simply an act of love by Almighty God. “*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*”⁶ This is amazing, extravagant, unfathomable love. How can we ever measure or describe such love?

In the 1930’s a couple of nerdy engineering students at the University of Toledo became very popular on campus by inventing a machine that could supposedly test the strength of love between college couples. It was called the “Cupidoscope,” and it basically consisted of a mechanism to deliver mild electric shocks to couples as they held hands and grasped the electrodes of the Cupidoscope. The higher the voltage they could tolerate, the stronger the love between the couple. All this was measured by a needle gauge decorated with hearts.⁷ The lack of Cupidoscopes today attests to the failure of the measurement. But if you want to measure the immeasurable love of God, you don’t need a Cupidoscope. All you have to do is to look at the cross and the empty tomb of Jesus, and you’ll get a pretty good idea.

How do we get in touch with the story and the history of Jesus and his resurrection? It’s pretty simple. It’s an act of faith. Just believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that God raised him from the dead. As Paul said, “*if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*”⁸ That’s not much of an entry requirement at all. Jesus said if you just have a mustard seed of faith, you can move mountains. The poster child for faith that is small but sufficient is the repentant thief on the cross. The guy was a criminal. He had never met Jesus until they hung together on adjacent crosses, both dying. Yet the repentant thief could see something in Jesus that touched his heart, and so he said, “*Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.*”⁹ He didn’t say, “Jesus, when I get off this cross, I’ll follow you; I’ll serve on committees; I’ll fill out a pledge card.” It was too late for that. He didn’t even tell Jesus he believed in him. Just “remember me when you come into your kingdom.” He knew. How did Jesus respond to this mustard seed of faith? Did he say, “I’m sorry, you have to join my church and agree with my doctrine before I can accept you?” No. Jesus said, “*Today you will be with me in paradise.*”¹⁰

What a difference it makes if you get close enough to touch Jesus! It changes everything. What difference is this Easter going to make to you? I admit, it is hard to make something new out of Easter. In fact, there is something comforting in the fact that the story hasn’t changed. The tomb is still empty after all these years. But this is approximately the 1,990th time Easter has been celebrated. How is the resurrection supposed to touch us?

James Howell has been preaching to Methodists about as long as I have, and this week he made this observation about Easter Sunday: “Folks are dressed for family luncheons, and if I talk resurrection they nod, as if I’d just spoken of how good it is to have gotten coffee and breakfast, or that gravity is still functioning.”¹¹ How can we be touched by

Easter today, and how can we share that touch with others? How can you and I embody the resurrection life?

First, share love. It's all about love. Jesus told the disciples the night before he died, "*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*"¹² Just love. Love God; love your neighbor. That's all Jesus needs from us.

On September 26, 2018, Amber Guyger, a white Dallas police officer, came home after a 13-hour shift. She got off on the wrong floor of her apartment building, and when she found the door unlocked to what she thought was her apartment, she pulled her service weapon. Inside the apartment, 26-year-old Botham Jean, a Black accountant, graduate of Harding University in Arkansas, was sitting unarmed on the couch eating ice cream. Without asking questions, Amber put two bullets in his chest. She was arrested, eventually charged with murder, and convicted. At the sentencing hearing, Botham's brother Brandt took the stand. His voice choked with emotion, he told Amber that she could never replace what she had taken from him, but that he forgave her. He wished her no harm. He said, "I love you as a person, and I want the best for you. And the best for you is to come to know Jesus Christ." Then Brandt asked permission to give Amber a hug. After a few moments, the judge agreed, and the brother of the murdered man and the murderer embraced in the courtroom. Later, the judge also embraced Amber and gave her a Bible, the one the judge used to swear people in, and told her that her job in prison was to read the Bible, starting with John 3:16, "For God so loved the world..."¹³ That was a touch of resurrection.

Finally, we embody the resurrection life of Jesus when we share hope. The resurrection of Jesus is about hope, hope that is not defeated by the powers of sin, evil, and death. Life crucifies hope. Just this week, somebody lost a loved one to death. Somebody lost a job. Somebody was diagnosed with a terrible disease. Somebody heard the words, "I don't love you anymore." Somebody lost their home in a tornado. Somebody was a victim of violence. Maybe that someone was you or someone you know. Life crucifies hope, and we are all touched by tragedy.

The message of Easter is, don't give up. Don't lose hope. Be encouraged. Encourage others. Because of Easter we know that God wins. We know that life matters.

British bishop and theologian N.T. Wright says of Easter, "The message of the resurrection is that this world matters! That the injustices and pains of this present world must now be addressed with the news that healing, justice, and love have won. If Easter means Jesus Christ is only raised in a spiritual sense—[then] it is only about me, and finding a new dimension in my personal spiritual life. But if Jesus Christ is truly risen from the dead, Christianity becomes good news for the whole world—news which warms our hearts precisely because it isn't just about warming hearts. Easter means that in a world where injustice, violence and degradation are endemic, God is not prepared to tolerate such things—and that we will work and plan, with all the energy of God, to implement victory of Jesus over them all."¹⁴

So welcome to Easter today, whether this is your first Easter or whether you can't remember how many. Welcome to Easter! This really matters. Easter is our reason for rejoicing, our foundation of faith, our fountain of forgiveness, the vindication of our victory. Easter is the gravity of grace, the extravagance of love, the ultimate touch of God. Let Easter touch you today. It will change everything!

¹ Luke 8:2.

² John 20:13.

³ John 20:15.

⁴ John 20:18.

⁵ James Allan Francis, 1926. <https://www.bartleby.com/lit-hub/respectfully-quoted/james-allan-francis-18641928/>.

⁶ John 3:16.

⁷ April White, “Inside a Decades-Long Quest to Measure Love,” *Atlas Obscura* (2-10-23).

⁸ Romans 10:9.

⁹ Luke 23:42.

¹⁰ Luke 23:43.

¹¹ James Howell, “What can we say on Easter Sunday?” *Ministrymatters.com*, April 5, 2023.

¹² John 13:34-35.

¹³ <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2023/april/power-of-unexpected-forgiveness.html>.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder_of_Botham_Jean. See video of testimony,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yHA0vpVpFDo>.

¹⁴ Tim Keller, *The Reason for God* (N. Y.: Penguin Books, 2009), 210.