

**Touch and See**  
(John 20:19-31)

4-27-25  
Rev. James Koyama

**A Peaceful Moment**

We had a very peaceful Easter Sunrise Service, last week. Before we went outside to see the sunrise, everyone sat in a circle around the coffee table in the small chapel. On the table were a candle and the crown of thorns, and some cups of water containing little flowers. They were the flowers that were woven into the crown that was on the big cross we brought in at the 10 o'clock service.

Each person in the circle said a prayer and added a flower to the crown. And every flower that was added, not only added beauty and color, but I like to think it replaced a thorn. Because that's what prayers, and good words and good deeds do in this world. They replace the deeds of cruelty that stab and cut like thorns.

But perhaps, for me, the most moving moment came before the service even started, while we were still waiting for others to arrive. The people who were gathered were chatting, sharing little bits of information, interwoven with light humor and laughter. It all happened as they were sitting in the circle together, naturally. Without even thinking about it, their light hearted conversation was

already weaving little flowers into the crown of life, replacing the thorns.

I think that is a good way to think of what it means to be a church. It can be a place of great healing, where sometimes you don't even realize that you are being healed because it happens in such a subtle and natural way, just through the every day sharing of our lives.

We are living in a world where the crown that holds us together often seems to be coming apart; where more and more of the chairs in the circle sit empty, and the joyful and gentle interweaving of our lives, face to face, is being done by fewer and fewer among us. But none of that stops those who are gathered from transforming a world with many grey hard thorns into a gentle crown, full of color and beauty and life

### **A Powerful Man with a Gentle Voice**

The gentle goodness I experienced on Easter morning, continued as a theme for me all through this past week, as we heard about the death of Pope Francis, a powerful man, with a very gentle voice, a man who's life reflected a deep commitment to the Gospel and who's message embodied this morning's Gospel reading.

Because, when Jesus tells Thomas to touch his wounds in order to know that he is God, he is doing more than just providing proof that he is the same Jesus they just saw die on the cross. He is also making himself a symbol of all who are wounded and who suffer unjustly in this world. And he is instructing Thomas, and by extension, all of us, that we must be “in touch” with those people.

This is what we must do, if we want to find God in our lives. We need to be able to find our way past the barriers that separate us from the pain and suffering of others and our suffering, so that we can be witnesses to it.

And that was what Pope Francis did. He worked to make sure that the Catholic hierarchy was not an elite organization, but one that was directly in touch with the common people, the poor and especially the immigrant and the victims of war. And he personally visited prisons, established relationships with people in war torn Gaza and other places.

### **Look People in the Eye**

One of the things that struck me from the reporting on the Pope’s death, was that he had said that, when you give something to

someone who is in need, it is not enough to hand them something. You must look them in the eye, because, he said, “that is the most important thing”.

That struck me as a very important point. And so, I went back to this morning’s Gospel, which I have read many times and sure enough “seeing” plays an important part in it. Whenever touching comes up, seeing is also mentioned. I had never noticed this in the past, because the idea of touching someone else’s wound dominated my attention. But the seeing is also essential.

The way I understand it, if we want to relate to the world in a way that is truthful and genuine, and we really care to understand others as they are, and not as we imagine them, we have to take the risk of looking them in the eye. Otherwise, we are not really relating to a real person. I think you could even say that people don’t really exist for us, unless we are willing to look them in the eye.

### **Seeing is Frightening/Takes Courage**

Another way of saying this is that, it is not really possible to understand the world and love our neighbors as ourselves unless we are willing to risk the intimacy that comes with looking into another person’s eyes. Not romantic intimacy. I’m talking about the intimacy

that comes from acknowledging who we are and what we have in common. Because when we look into another person's eyes, we see into them and they can see into us. In a way, looking into another person's eyes is a way of acknowledging that we are on the same level. It is an act of hospitality, an invitation to relationship.

Looking someone in the eye can also be somewhat frightening, because when you look into another person's eyes, you don't know what you will see and whether you will be met with acceptance or rejection. And the idea of being rejected as a fellow human being is threatening. So there is a kind of safety in avoiding someone's gaze.

But if our boundaries become too fixed and impassable, we also prevent real relationships and true friendships from coming into being. And so, as frightening as it can sometimes be, I think that having the courage to look people in the eye, especially when we feel uncertain, is a way of staying connected to the truth about who we are surrounded by and also a way of being open to what God wants to say to us through them. If we look people in the eye with "peace in our hearts", I don't think we will see what we imagine. What we will often see is something new that God wants us to see.

## **Peace Be With You”**

I mention having peace in our hearts, because I think that it is hard to see well unless we have inner peace. When we are anxious or angry, our minds are like the choppy surface of a lake throwing up all kinds of confusing images. Whereas when we are at peace, our minds are like a mirror that can reflect accurately what we see.

And I think this is one of the reasons why Jesus keeps saying “Peace Be With You” in this morning’s Gospel. The usual explanation is that his disciples are shocked to see him alive after seeing him die on the cross, and they need to be calmed down because they think they are seeing a ghost.

But I think it is also Jesus’s way of helping us to cope with the challenge of connecting with the suffering and needs of others in an intimate way. He is saying, “Relax, be at peace. Don’t be afraid of touching or being touched by others or looking the other person in the eye. Intimacy is frightening and risky; but I am breathing a Spirit of Peace into your heart, so that you will know me in your seeing and touching”.

As I watched footage of the Pope meeting long lines of people, he made a point of looking each person in the eye. And as he spoke to

them, it seemed that there was always a gentle kindness and approachability about him. This was the most powerful person in the religious world today, humble and kind and gentle, but strong in faith.

There is something so understated and peaceful about that kind of power, that you almost don't realize that it is being wielded at all; the softest of power! It is sort of like the way I felt before the Easter Sunrise Service as I listened to the people around me, "weaving little flowers into the crown of thorns" with their sharing and laughter. It was a gentle power, the softest of soft power. But in that moment, I felt so healed by it, it came as a breath of Peace as proof of the Risen Christ.