

Jaylynn and I got to eat at Chetola this week in Blowing Rock. I was admiring the Bob Timberlake paintings in there. His name is on the restaurant marquee, so we knew he was associated with the place.<sup>1</sup> Our host pointed out a few of the paintings.<sup>2</sup> And then our host said “and here, Jason and Jaylynn, meet Bob Timberlake.” There he was himself, a North Carolina treasure, and the artist of those paintings. He signed a book for us, asked how to spell our name correctly, took a personal interest. And I got to thinking, hey wait, that’s a bit like God. We’re surrounded by images made by God all the time—that is, other human beings. Any beauty in us is due to the artist who created us. And then at some point in our life we hopefully get a chance to meet the artist, God himself. If the paintings are good how much better must their creator be? And then God is interested in us? Delights in us even?

This sermon is the first in a short series on the body of Christ. We’ll end with a combined service for my last Sunday, June 28, here in this sanctuary at 11 with a final meal together after before my family heads west, I hope we’ll sleep near the Mississippi River that night. I love talking about Christ’s body because it reminds us whether we’re near or far away, whether we’re breathing right now or long dead, what knits us together is the body of Christ. More than our own affection or friendship, more than whether we like each other or not, more than whether we know each other personally or not, the body of Christ unites us like legs to eyelashes, sinews to spleen. Hear this great story about the resurrected body of Christ and as you hear it think about what it says about the church, about our bodies, and about God. Let us stand and sing and turn and listen.

John 20:24-29

*24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” 26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” 27 Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” 28 Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” 29 Jesus*

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<sup>1</sup> <http://ih.constantcontact.com/fs040/1102078786320/img/65.jpg?a=1102815354824>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bobtimberlake.com/pilotFiles/collectorPrints/thumbs/Swan-Island-thunbnail.jpg>

said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

This is the word of God, it belongs to you, the people of God, **thanks be to God.**

There’s a play out on Broadway about God called *An Acts of God*, based on a book called *The Last Testament* and a Twitter account called The Tweet of God. That twitter account has 2 million followers and follows only one person—Justin Bieber. The creator is a writer for Jon Stewart and Saturday Night Live and uses lots of jokes with verily and lo and checketh it out in them. God jokes in the play that he hates the Ten Commandments the way a rock band hates its most famous song—the way the Rolling Stones are sick of playing “Start Me Up.” And he jokes that God inflicted the famine on potatoes in Ireland because, well *the potatoes know why*. Not that funny, is it? Because to see why God and God’s people are funny you do better to be part of them, and then you know man we’re hilarious. We think a crucified Jew rose from the dead and rules the cosmos through people like us who can hardly manage our own lives?! That’s the best sort of joke there is. But the real problem is the God in the play and twitter account is not Trinity. We Christians don’t mean what others mean by the word “God.” We don’t mean a big mean dude in the sky who smites people. We mean the Father of Jesus and the Holy Spirit they both send. Three who are always one, a community of love. At the heart of the universe there is a relationship.<sup>1</sup> And the God who is relationship creates us for relationship. If you want to know who God is friends, please, look at Jesus. The body of Christ isn’t just one more person. It’s God with skin on.

Think again of the story I just read to you. Poor Thomas has been labeled Doubting Thomas ever since. Jeff McClain preached on this beautifully before—Thomas gets identified with his faults in a way none of us wants to be. A preacher I admire says this about Thomas. She’s heard believable people, credible smart people, swear they’ve seen UFO’s. Ghosts. Had out of body experiences. ESP. All kinds of weird stuff. She’s open to it. But she doesn’t believe it personally. Not unless she were to experience it herself. I’m an easily fooled person, sort of gullible. Jaylynn and I were with friends once who were praising another friend not present and one said, “You know another amazing thing about Jon is that both his parents are dwarves.” I said “Really?!” And he went on, oh yeah, it’s surprising isn’t it? I’ve learned to raise the nonsense meter a little closer to Thomas’ level.

Thomas had invested a lot in Jesus only to be disappointed after three years of his life don't turn out. When Jesus tells the twelve they know the way he's going Thomas interjects,<sup>3</sup> "Lord, we don't know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Poor Thomas is sorta literal minded. Jesus says, uh, Tommy, *I* am the way, the truth, and the life. But don't say Thomas is not courageous. When the twelve are in danger and Jesus asks them to come with him he rallies the troops,<sup>4</sup> "Let us go also, that we may die with him." He was ready to give his life. He just wasn't ready for Jesus to give his without a fight. And then they're saying he's alive? What do you think he was born yesterday? Fool me once shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me. So this bar is not too high I don't think:<sup>5</sup> "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not *ever* believe." Who can blame him?

And Jesus turns up. And says this,<sup>6</sup> "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas, formerly doubting Thomas, gives the fullest expression of faith of anyone in the whole bible when he says to Jesus,<sup>7</sup> "My Lord and my God!" Look how far Jesus went out of his way to satisfy the doubts of one follower. Gives Thomas exactly what he needed. And Thomas believed.

What about you? What do you need from Jesus to believe?

I love this painting of the story from Caravaggio. The disciples are clumped together looking with deep interest. Thomas looks with astonishment. Is it true that death is defeated? Jesus looks pained almost showing them his wounds. The disciples are poor men, holes in their clothes. They are poorer still in faith, wrinkles on their brows. It's all the more impressive when you see other efforts to paint this scene.<sup>8</sup> This looks like some sort of deodorant commercial from long ago.<sup>9</sup> This looks like some sort of horrid medical exam.<sup>10</sup> Here Jesus looks more ghost than person, and more than a little spooky.<sup>11</sup> But here with our original Thomas' surprise is physical, radiant, gentle light falls on them. What if it's all true? That God made the universe, saves it in Christ, and through his Holy Spirit is working to make all things new right now? Isn't everything different?

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<sup>5</sup> Jn 20:25

<sup>6</sup> Jn 20:27

<sup>7</sup> Jn 20:28

<sup>8</sup> <http://wp.production.patheos.com/blogs/joelmiller/files/2012/04/doubting-thomas.jpg>

<sup>9</sup> [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/cb/Hendrick\\_ter\\_Brugghen\\_-\\_The\\_Incredulity\\_of\\_Saint\\_Thomas\\_-\\_WGA22166.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/cb/Hendrick_ter_Brugghen_-_The_Incredulity_of_Saint_Thomas_-_WGA22166.jpg)

<sup>10</sup> [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e3/Guercino\\_-\\_Doubting\\_Thomas\\_-\\_WGA10951.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e3/Guercino_-_Doubting_Thomas_-_WGA10951.jpg)

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.christusrex.org/www2/art/images/carav10.jpg>

Yes, it is. Thomas, according to church legend, preached the gospel all the way to India, sharing the gospel with Parthians and Medes and Persians on the way, till being speared to death for his faith. Sound like a doubter to you?

Notice one more thing.<sup>12</sup> Thomas' finger may look familiar.<sup>13</sup> This is God's finger in Michaelangelo's painting of creation. Caravaggio knew and admired Michaelangelo's work.<sup>14</sup> He's trying to show that touching the body of Jesus and coming to faith is as great a miracle as God's creation of the world in the first place.

So what about us? How do we touch God's body like that?

<sup>15</sup>First, by touching Jesus himself. It's hard to get our mind around the Jewish idea of the incarnation. The play I started with thinks of god as a slightly senile old guy on a throne smiting people with lightning bolts. It's a lie. That's not God. A friend is a minister who loves talking to strangers on a plane about faith. I hate it—they tell me all the wrong things they think about God. When I sit next to a doctor I don't say all the things I hate about medicine. I ask questions and listen. Sigh. My friend is holier than I am so he asks "Tell me about the god you don't believe in." They do. And he inevitably concludes this way, "I don't believe in that God either. Let me tell you about Jesus." Jesus is who we believe in friends. Not any generic god or nasty god or rude god or evil or stupid god. Jesus is God in one Jew. The incarnation seems like such a fancy word. But it's not so hard. Think about chili—if you want it con carne that means with meat. *Incarnation* means God with meat.<sup>ii</sup>

Lots of cultures and religions have myths about a king or god coming among their people. These are little echoes of the incarnation. You may have seen video of U2 giving a concert in disguise in the New York subway recently. Who's that group making noise at rush hour? They're the most famous rock band in the world. When Mumford & Sons played in Asheville in 2011 Marcus Mumford said he'd walked around during the opening acts. We all looked around at each other. He was here among us? Suddenly the strangers in the hallway are more interesting. They might be the guy we came to see. In 2008 the *Washington Post* had Joshua Bell play in a subway station. Thousands of people hurried past. 6 stopped. He collected \$32. The thing is, he's one of the greatest musicians in the world. 2 nights before he'd played to sold out Boston for \$100 a pop. His violin was a Stradivarius worth \$3.5 million. You know what's interesting? Of the folks who

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<sup>12</sup> <https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/736x/c0/a2/08/c0a2087a91177827f955df3c31645b3b.jpg>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.jeffwidmer.com/crossroads/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/michelangelo-finger-of-god-lg.jpg>

<sup>14</sup> <https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/736x/c0/a2/08/c0a2087a91177827f955df3c31645b3b.jpg>

<sup>15</sup> I. The incarnation is God in flesh

stopped many were children. Their parents pushed them on, but they wanted to hear. Next generation now. I love these stories, I got more of them. Johnny St. Clair who spent a summer in our congregation was shopping at REI once. The sales clerk couldn't close the deal on a bike rack. But he came after him and said "Hey, look, I'm actually the CEO of Yakima, the company that makes those racks. I'll discount the rack however much you need." He walked away with a rack. The CEO is my clerk?! These reversal stories all come from the incarnation. The almighty God is helplessly dependent on an umbilical cord attached to Mary. He gets born and learns to walk and goes through puberty and dies. For us. That's God. Con carne. In flesh like ours.

A farmer was watching a flock of birds one winter. It was so cold out he knew they'd die if they didn't find a warm place but there was none. Except the farmer's barn. This farmer already likes animals more than I do. So he tried to convince them to fly into his barn. Only he couldn't. To the birds he must've looked like a crazy man. And he thought, if only I could become a bird, I could lead them into the barn, to safety! And suddenly the incarnation made sense. God becomes one of us to show us how to be human.

<sup>16</sup>Secondly, we can touch God by touching his wounds. All wounds mean something different now. I find this endlessly comforting—Jesus' wounds aren't gone in his resurrection. They're transfigured.<sup>17</sup> Look at the image again, how bluntly physical it is. And as Jesus says to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Jesus knows what Thomas asked for before. And gives exactly what he needed. He takes Thomas' woundedness and provides exactly the right healing. Jesus' wounds aren't death dealing anymore. They're life giving. What about us? How can our wounds be life-giving? One of you answered that question for me this way—wounds become your superpower. I've found that. Y'all have heard before of my mom who was a lifelong alcoholic and drug abuser, finally died of it. I'm not sure it's made me more patient with folks who struggle—I get impatient with folks who remind me of her actually. But it has made me realize this—nearly every family has alcoholism in it. Mental illness too. Families are just good at hiding that from the world. We're all flawed. No one is perfect. The only advantage we religious people have is we admit we're flawed. We know it. And Jesus takes our flaws, our wounds, and pours life out of them for others. Think of blood—it's a sign of a wound, maybe death. And in Christ we see blood is life-giving, beautiful. St. Thomas is patron saint of several things in the church. One is blindness. Because he was blind. And Christ helped him see. Now even blindness can be a gift. I have a limp

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<sup>16</sup> II. Jesus' wounds are life-giving

<sup>17</sup> <https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/736x/c0/a2/08/c0a2087a91177827f955df3c31645b3b.jpg> back again

I didn't have now when I got to you, foot drop problem from a back injury while I was in Rwanda on a trip with y'all. I was so moved to see y'all's get well cards from two years ago as I packed. And I joked with some of you I was trying to be more like Bobby Sharp, a patriarch here who had polio as a boy. But then I realized the joke was sort of true. Bobby's injury has marked his life. And made him gentle, a healer of others' souls. Lord make us all limp like that! Wounds don't have to go that way. They can make you bitter, alone. Or in Christ they can give life to others. I vote for that don't you?

<sup>18</sup>Finally this, we can touch Christ's wounds by touching one another's wounds. It's a cliché to say a broken bone heals stronger than it was before, but it's true. Or as I tell my boys when they get injured, 'It's ok, chicks dig the scars.' One way to strike up a conversation with a total stranger is by asking them about a scar that's visible (or a tattoo, but that's another sermon). Friends of mine were in a volcano eruption and a crocodile attack—and they have the best stories to share ever. The poet Jane Hirshfield says this about scars:

*And see how the flesh grows back  
Across a wound, with a great vehemence,  
More strong  
Than the simple, untested surface before.  
There's a name for it on horses,  
When it comes back darker and raised: proud flesh,  
As all flesh,  
Is proud of its wounds, wears them  
As honors given out after battle,  
Small triumphs pinned to the chest—*

I wonder if in glory we'll go around asking about one another's scars...because that's where the light shines through.

Here's the magical thing about the body of Christ. It's stretchy. Like proud flesh. The body of Christ is the one born of Mary who died in 33 AD. It's also us, the church, head and members, bound to one another. When Christians suffer here or around the world that's our body; when others rejoice that's our joy. The body of Christ is also the body and blood of Christ on the altar, given for us. When St. Augustine invites his church to the altar for communion he says this, "Take what you already are." In the body of Christ wounds are life-giving after they're death

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<sup>18</sup> III. One another's wounds are life-giving

dealing. Each of our wounds. One medieval monk when the doorbell to the monastery would ring would holler out, “I’m coming Lord.” Because every guest is Christ. That’s true of each of us. Each person in this room is an image of Jesus. How we treat them is how we treat him.

Let me close with this. Pastor Laura our discipleship coordinator tells this story. Once a month a group from here serves a meal at the Hospitality House. This last month we had to scramble to find folks. Laura lives in Bradford Park to be a neighbor to the poor, and realize how poor she is. Well that day her neighbors in Bradford helped with the meal. Some of JB’s boys in the park he works with. A friend was visiting who works in a shelter out of town and said ‘I thought this was my day off but I’m game.’ So Boone Methodist we were represented doing good by friends we don’t know in the trailer park. That’s the body of Christ. We get credit for that! And each guest they served was Jesus giving thanks for us. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> It’s Darrell Johnson’s formulation borrowed from Ken Shigematsu.

<sup>ii</sup> It’s Shaine Claiborne’s point