

John 20:19-31

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." ²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So 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."

²⁶A 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." ²⁷Then 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." ²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." ³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Our hands tell a lot about who we are. Have you ever thought about that? About what our hands reveal about us? Maybe it's because I get to stand at the back of the church each week and shake your hands that I notice them more than most people. But each week there are dozens of hands that I shake. Some hands are calloused and rough, revealing the hard work that they have seen. Other hands are permanently stained with dirt or grease, revealing that they are involved in some kind of mechanical or manual labor.

Other hands are perfectly manicured and soft. Some of your hands are huge – you can easily palm a basketball. I remember Jesse Helgeson, who died a few months ago, and he had the biggest hands I have ever seen – and those hands worked so hard for so many years.

Some of your hands are tiny – and I love shaking the hands of our younger members. Their hands show so much promise for the future. And I can always tell what the temperature of the church is by some of your hands. On days it's too cold, your hands are always freezing – and when it's too hot, your hands are always warm.

And there is something to be said about hands that are well used. Those hands that are full of age spots and wrinkles and probably have a few scars or arthritic joints. Those are hands that have experienced a lot of life, both good and bad. Those are hands that I want to learn from, those are hands that have wisdom.

Listen to what one Cherokee saying tells us about hands:

"Our hands tell who we are. They are believed to be perfect subjects of the mind. As physical labor shows in the callouses on our palms, so does gentleness or greediness or strength. Nothing else expresses human behavior in so many ways. With our hands, we work, play, love, threaten, show joy or grief. Sensitive symbols of faith and friendship, our hands draw to us everything and everyone we love. Marvelously made and directed by the mind's eye, the mind's ear, and the heart's desire, our hands continually express our lives. An abusive hand is from an abusive mind. But the gentle touch does exist - even for those who have yet to experience it. What words cannot say, the hands can express with all tenderness and love."

“Our hands tell who we are.” And in our gospel reading, Jesus’ hands say everything. Jesus’ hands show everything that matters. They show what he went through. His hands showed those holes where the nails went through. Those hands experienced pain and suffering and abandonment. They experienced death. But then those hands experienced resurrection and joy beyond any comprehension.

And it was those hands that have given us grace. Pure grace. Total forgiveness of our sins. Jesus’ hands have given us a second chance. Another try. A chance to live our lives as chosen and loved people of God.

And Thomas needed to see those holes. Maybe he gets a bad reputation for needing to see, but I’ll bet many of us would have taken the chance to see those holes as well. Because the good news was almost unbelievable. That someone could rise from the dead. That he died for our sins. That now all believers were forgiven and could live in grace.

And now Jesus extends his hands to us. We are now Jesus’ hands in this world. We are now the ones who will do the work that God needs us to do. Our hands will continue to bless this world. With our work. With our hugs. With our serving. With our love.

How are your hands doing God’s work? Have you ever thought about that? In order to help us with this question, I have an exercise I would like to do with you, if you’re willing:

Sit with your palms up resting in your lap, eyes closed, tune into your breathing.

Become aware of the air at your fingertips, between your fingers, on the palm of your hand. Experience the fullness, strength and maturity of your hands. Think of your hands, think of the most unforgettable hands you have known. The hands of your father, your mother, your grandparents.

Remember the oldest hands that have rested in your hands. Think of the hands of a new born child, your nephew or niece or grandchild, of the incredible perfection, delicacy of the hands of a child. Once upon a time your hands were the same size.

Think of all that your hands have done since then. Almost all that you have learned is through your hands. You have turned yourself over. You have crawled and crept, walked and balanced yourself. You learned to hold something for the first time; you fed yourself; dressed yourself. At one time your greatest accomplishment was tying your own shoes.

Think of all the learning your hands have done and how many activities they have mastered, the things that they have made. Remember the day you could write your own name.

Our hands were not just made for themselves but for others. How often were they given to help another. Remember all the kinds of work they have done, the tiredness and aching they have known, the cold and the heat, the soreness and the bruises. Remember the tears they have wiped away, our own or another’s, the blood they have bled, the healing they have experienced.

How much hurt, anger and even violence have they expressed and how much gentleness, tenderness and love they have given.

How often they have been folded in prayer; both a sign of their powerlessness and of their power.

There is a mystery which we discover in the hand of a woman or a man that we love. There are the hands of a doctor, a nurse, an artist, a conductor, a priest, hands which you can never forget.

Now raise your right hand slowly and gently place it over your heart. Press more firmly until your hand picks up the beat of your heart that most mysterious of all human sounds, one's own heartbeat, a rhythm learned in the womb from the heartbeat of one's own mother.

Press more firmly for a moment than release your hand and hold it just a fraction from your clothing. Experience the warmth between your hand and your heart. Now lower your hand to your lap very carefully as if you were carrying your heart. For it does. When you extend your hand to another, its not just bone and skin, it is your heart.

A handshake is a real heart transplant.

Think of all the hands that have left their imprint on you. Fingerprints and hands that have left their imprint on you. Fingerprints and handprints are heartprints that can never be erased. The hand has its own memory. Think of all the places that carry your handprints and all the people who bear your handprint. They are indelible and will last forever.

And now ask God to help you serve with those hands that have experienced so much. Ask God to show you where your hands are needed. Whether it's in this church, in your home, in the community, or the world.

Make sure your hands are open in your lap. Because when your hands are open, they are willing to receive. Willing to receive God's touch. Willing to receive God's love. Willing to receive God's direction. For it is with an open hand that God will take place his hand in yours and walk with you.

You can open your eyes now. Thank you for being willing to participate in this exercise! Our hands have a lot of work to do. Our hands have a lot to say about us. What you're your hands say about you? Amen.