

April 24, 2011
Easter Day
Acts 10:33-43
Colossians 3:1-4
John 20:1-18

Jesus said to Mary, "Touch me not."

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Good morning and welcome... Thank you...

In the 1960s and '70s, researchers began teaching chimpanzees American sign language. Washoe was among the first chimpanzees to sign. She learned about 350 words and even figured out how to combine signs to express more complex thoughts. Her favorite, most common combination was "tickle more." Chimps love tickling and being tickled.

So do human beings, at least infants and children. Along with suckling and smiling, tickling may be instinctive, a way to cement the bond between parents and their infants. It builds a foundation for our social lives and reinforces the value of touching.

Much recent psychological research indicates that touching, physical contact, be it a high five or a pat on the back or a brush of a shoulder, is "our richest means of emotional expression."¹ Studies report that students who receive a supportive touch on the back or arm are twice as likely to volunteer in class as those who don't. If during a doctor's appointment, the doctor sympathetically touches the patient, the patient had the impression that the visit lasted twice as long. I suppose that means it felt like four minutes instead of two!

A couple years ago a research team examined touching in the National Basketball Association, players high-fiving, fist bumping, chest bumping, hugging, patting on the rear. For the most part, the best teams were the touchiest, and the worst teams were the least touchy. The Celtics and the Lakers were the two touchiest, and both went to the finals; the 2009 champs, the Lakers, the touchiest.

The researchers made sure to account that better teams would have more to be touchy about, and still they found that touching improves performance. Touchy teams, they found, get the most of their players' talents. People play closer to their potential.

Brain studies suggest that positive touching reduces stress. When we're touched positively, appropriately, our bodies release oxytocin, a hormone that creates the sensation of trust and helps us relax. A supportive touch tells us: "We're in this together." "I'm on your side." "I care."

Think of the ways we communicate with touching. Think of hugs we give at times of celebration and of sorrow; think of touching at greeting and separating; think of tender, erotic touching; think of another kind of tenderness, a parent changing a diaper; think of taking a someone's arm to provide support; think of tussling a child's hair or patting her on the back. Might not all this tender touching, in a way, be an apprehension or a search for God's touch?

Think of the Sistine Chapel and Michelangelo's astonishing painting of creation, God reaching out to touch Adam, the touch that sparks life. For Michelangelo, it's the touch that breathes life into Adam, the touch that fills us with God's breath, his Spirit.

Jesus did a lot of touching. Touching was a vital part of his ministry of healing, be it lepers, the blind, the dead. Touching made them whole. People brought babies to Jesus for him to touch them. A woman, possibly Mary Magdalene, came and touched him, anointing him with expensive nard. Another woman, a harlot, washed Jesus' feet with her tears, kissed them, and dried them with her hair. It horrified religious people that he'd have physical contact with her.

So what's going on in today's gospel? "Touch me not." Has Jesus all of sudden become priggish? He allows the other disciples to inspect and to touch his risen body, to gawk and to poke at him, to make sure he's really there, not a ghost, but corporeal. Did Mary have cooties?

Mary's touch has more passion. She's longing for Jesus. In the Song of Solomon, the Bible's book of risqué love poetry, the maiden dreams of her lover:

I sought him whom my soul loves;
I sought him, but found him not...
I will rise now and go about the city,
I will look on every street...
When I found him whom my soul loves
I held him, and would not let him go. (Song of Solomon, 3:1-4)

It's Mary searching for Jesus on Easter morning. Of course, it's Jesus who finds her and calls her. The risen Jesus does not make himself known first to his mother, the most blessed of all people, or to the beloved disciple, who represents you and me and who out runs Peter to the tomb, but rather Jesus first appears to people most in need, the most defeated, the most disgraced. Fresh from his own experience of suffering and abandonment on the cross, Jesus comes to Mary, the most shattered, empty, needy, and clinging of his disciples.²

The scene that unfolds is not only one of great tenderness and affection, but it's also a second Genesis. John begins his gospel evoking Genesis, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Now he concludes his gospel with Genesis: a man and a woman, a new Adam and Eve, a garden, and a new, or renewed, creation where death is broken, destroyed. John gives us a new creation story – not a resuscitated corpse, not Lazarus come back to life, but the risen Jesus himself alive in a new way, a new kind of life, as the beginning, the breaking in of the new creation.

Mary Magdalene expects to resume her former relationship with Jesus. She's clinging to him, holding on firmly to her source of joy. She assumes Jesus has come back to be with her and the disciples as before. But Jesus tells Mary that she can't hold on to what was, that she needs to let go because he is soon to ascend to his Father. That's good news because that will allow him to be present to her in a new way. There'll be a new relationship, a deeper relationship that isn't possible until he returns to heaven.

Sometimes separation and loss and pain are necessary for something fuller to grow. In our own lives, can we allow people to change, to evolve, to allow for it, to make space for it, to welcome it? Jesus is saying, "Mary, you have to let go now. I'm something new. We'll be with each other in a new way."

The new way that they'll touch is even more intimate, a closer union. Maybe you've held someone tightly, in need, in passion, in love, desiring to be so close as to be fully one, united, to enter the other, to know and to be present in them? That embrace is what Jesus offers Mary and each of us.

Now that he's ascended, he comes to us in new ways, some ways that can still be described as "touching." Pre-eminently, this happens in the eating of the Lord's risen body and drinking his risen blood: a touching so deep and intimate and thorough that now Christ lives in each of us. We've come together, the risen Jesus in us and we in him – the Christ who lives in me, as Paul wrote. (Gal 2:20) Today, Jesus is telling Mary, "Touch me not because I

have not yet gone to my Father, and once I have, then we'll have a fuller, richer communion which is not yet possible. Then we'll touch always."

The good news of Easter is that the new, risen life exists in us now. Today's feast, the greatest of the year, helps us be aware that God loves us, wants intimacy with us so much that now he lives in us. So as we worship, and sing hymns, and celebrate, and thank God for all the ordinary and yet incredible blessings of our lives, let's pray that inside we each may feel and know the tender touch of God and share it.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Benedict Carey, "Evidence That Little Touches Do Mean So Much," The New York Times, February 23, 2010.

² Frank Lake, *Clinical Theology*, Emeth Press (2005), first published by Darton, Longman & Todd (1966), p. 451. His sub-chapter "The Method of the Master with Mary Magdalene" (pp. 446–454) provided essential insights for much of this sermon.