

**Pregnancy, the series, #1: The Strip Turned Blue (The Touch of Love)– John 20:19-29**  
**Saint Marks UMC, Charleston, WV – 2s Sunday of Easter (April 7) 2013**

<sup>19</sup> On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." <sup>20</sup> When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.<sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."<sup>22</sup> And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."

<sup>24</sup> Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup> So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."

<sup>26</sup> Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." <sup>27</sup> Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." <sup>28</sup> Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" <sup>29</sup> Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

The Worship Committee met over a two month period, spending 4-1/2 hours discussing the scriptures of the liturgical season of Easter (beginning last Sunday through Pentecost Sunday, May 19.) In studying them all, they came to the realization that the story of a pregnancy is being described.

Last Sunday (Easter Sunday – March 31) was Conception Sunday. Like the way it happens in life, no one talked about that last Sunday. We just had the spectacular feel good celebration.

This Sunday, we get the news: The EPT strip turned blue; a baby is coming.

Throughout the season of Easter we will be going through a season of Pregnancy. We are asking you to bring in a gift for the Baby Shower -- on May 9-Ascension Sunday, the Sunday before the Birth of the Baby/Church, Pentecost, May 16. On May 9 (Mother's Day/Baby Shower Day) we will have some expectant mothers visiting us, who will receive these Baby Shower gifts.

This morning's Gospel passage includes two related, yet separate Easter Stories:

1. Jesus reassures His disciples that he is indeed alive, and then he puts them to work. **The message is that Easter is not an ending, but a beginning.**
2. The story of Thomas reassures us that **the Risen Lord is still the kind, understanding Jesus.** He is **not offended by the questions, but honors them and offers to let Thomas touch the wounds, if that's what it takes** to answer his questions. In so doing, Jesus blesses all our questions. No honest question is too silly, disrespectful, or unworthy to be asked and answered (or at least discussed.)

***Notice one little detail about the central character of Thomas in the Gospel lesson: In verse 24, Thomas is called “the Twin.” Despite that reference, nowhere in the New Testament, are we ever told who is Thomas’ sibling.***

***It leads me to believe that when Thomas is called “the Twin,” it’s a reference to how much Thomas is like YOU AND ME. We are “the Twin” of Thomas.***

Many points can be, and have been, made from today’s Gospel lesson, including HOW DOUBTING IS NOT THE OPPOSITE OF FAITH, BUT THE PREREQUISITE OF REAL FAITH. We can’t be too hard on Thomas, because as we remember from last week’s lesson, his reaction to the resurrection news is no less credulous than were the other apostles’ who thought the report given Easter morning by the women was a bunch of “layros.” (a bunch of “bull,” we learned last week.)

But Jesus is not offended. Indeed Jesus offers to meet Thomas at his need, with the important message of TOUCH.

Touch -- the sense that exists first in the embryonic environment probably from the third week of life on -- is also considered one of the last to fade. From the first kick sensed by the mother to the gentle massage given by her to the infant still in the womb, with the tactile connection a huge percentage of human communication occurs.

Considered the first language of human interaction, touch truly binds together, for one cannot touch the skin of another without that other’s skin touching back.

The importance of touch has long been established in the Eastern world, tracing its healing properties back to the shamans of old who knew that laying one of hands and physical pressure could change somatic states. Jesus himself used touch to clear blind eyes, to straighten crooked limbs, and to hand children back to their parents.

In the Western world, the notion of touch HAS BEEN seen much differently. Ironically, westerners so often see touch so closely associated with sexual and sensual gestures, that the care and comfort a touch can bring HAS BEEN often overlooked.

In a world in which children are warned against touching each other, teachers and child care workers withhold human touch because of fear of litigation, we have grown into a people paralyzed by fear.

The positive value of touch was revealed dramatically and tragically for medical personnel through its absence. In the 20s and 30s of the last century high incidences of infant mortality were observed in hospitals, orphanages, and other care facilities in which babies were physically fed but not physically held.

I recall learning several years ago about a group of nuns who took in so many orphans in England during World War II that they were unable to provide any hugging or positive touching. Feeding and diaper changing were reduced to machine like efficiency for the babies. The sad truth is that every single one of those babies lovingly brought in, but not lovingly touched, ended up in prison as adults.

Fortunately, much medical and other research is beginning to open our eyes, today. Time prevents my going into detail, but come see me if you are interested, and let me share with you some of what I've found. Suffice it for now to say that research is showing that human-to-human touch is being demonstrated to have:

- Curative properties
- Stress reduction
- Increased hormonal stimulation that leads to better learning
- A greater sense of being a team and improved effectiveness (Ever wonder why the free throw shooter touches the hands of teammates, while at the foul line? Yep, statistically, they shoot better with that touch beforehand!)
- Improved Pain Management
- Boosting of immunity
- Better and stronger relationships – the SINGLE factor consistent in studies of marriages that last is the fact that the couple kisses each night before going to sleep and each morning upon awaking
- Better communication of eight distinct emotions – ranging from gratitude to disgust to love. As one study put it: you can lie easily with words; the eyes will often belie your words; a human touch absolutely conveys the truth: never touch someone if you are telling them a lie; it will always give away your true feeling!

This Gospel lesson tells us that Jesus understood the importance of touching, for Thomas and for us. This pregnancy is only going to last seven weeks, and it will result in the birth of the Church.

Yes, indeed! We are going to have a baby.

Our scripture on Pentecost Day, in 6 weeks, will tell us that the Holy Spirit came at the birth of the Church. But for now, we need to remember that

this in vitro baby is also alive. Today's scripture also tells us (verse 22) that Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit into that baby still in the womb. The baby may not be born until the end of the pregnancy, but the living and the learning (from touch) begin now.

Let us touch one another loving and meaningfully in all that we do.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.