

They Touched Jesus

Twice in my life I have met current presidents of the United States. I remember well the occasions. I remember where I was, what I wore and what was said. But the most memorable moment of all was when we shook hands and looked into each other's eyes. It is one experience to see a famous world leader from a distance, to watch them on television or read about them in a book or in the newspaper, but it is quite a different matter to actually touch that person.

We all know that there are different types of touch. The list includes the touch of love and the touch of hate, the touch of respect and the touch of abuse, the tender touch and the touch of terror.

In and around the Easter story there were many who actually touched Jesus. That must have been an amazing thing to do: to reach out and touch God in human skin. I wonder if anyone could make such a touch and ever be the same.

The first to touch Jesus in the Easter story was one of his closest friends—a man named Judas. Because Judas was such a common name he was usually identified by his hometown of Iscariot. In that way he was much like Jesus who also had a common name and was often identified by his hometown of Nazareth. Jesus saw great potential in Judas and invited him to become part of his group of twelve disciples. Jesus even made him the treasurer. But Judas never quite fit. He never fully believed.

Judas was loyal to Jesus during the best of times, but he became a traitor when things did not go his way. He decided to sell out Jesus to his enemies for thirty silver coins. He agreed to reveal Jesus' secret place in the Garden of Gethsemane

outside Jerusalem and to identify Jesus to the police so they were sure to arrest the one they wanted. The signal to the arresting officers was to be a kiss. Matthew 26:47-50 says:

While (Jesus) was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived. With him

was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: "The one I kiss is the man; arrest him." Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kissed him.

Jesus replied, "Friend, do what you came for."

Then the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him.

What a loser! Judas could have gone down in all of history and into eternity for his loyalty to Jesus. Instead he went down in history and eternity for a kiss of betrayal.

After he was arrested, Jesus was tried and convicted for a capital offense even though he was innocent. But rather than acknowledge that he was the Son of God and the Messiah, the guards who surrounded him touched him with physical abuse. In Luke 22:63-65 we read, *"The men who were guarding Jesus began mocking and beating him. They blindfolded him and demanded, 'Prophecy! Who hit you?'* And they said many other insulting things to him."

Can you imagine standing in the presence of the most powerful and famous person in all of the universe and making fun of him? They blindfolded

him, punched him and asked him to guess who had hit him. Jesus could have called 10,000 angels from heaven to protect him and zap them, but he didn't. Jesus took the assault.

How pathetic! They could have fallen on their knees and worshipped Jesus, the King of kings and Lord of lords, but instead

they beat him up for the fun of it.

Jesus' next stop on the Easter journey was to an execution hill outside the city gate. He was turned over to a team of experienced Roman executioners. By the time they first touched Jesus he was in pretty bad shape. He had been severely

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beaten back in the city—so severely that everyone could see he would not last long when crucified.

For the soldiers it was a job. It was not up to them to decide if a prisoner was innocent or guilty. It was their job to kill him. And so they followed the protocol. They stripped the prisoner of all clothes. They laid him down on the cross, one held him down while another felt for the soft spot in the wrist, drove the spike through the wrist and then did the same to the other wrist. After that they bent his knees, drove a third spike through both feet, then lifted the cross and dropped it in the socket in the ground. After that they just watched and waited for the prisoner to die. Luke 23:32-37 tells us:

Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One.”

The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.”

What must it have been like to hold Jesus down? They felt his muscles and skin. They looked into his eyes. They nailed him to the cross. In one way I am astounded at the horror of what they did. Yet, I am glad they did it—because when Jesus died he paid the price for my sin. There is an uncomfortable sense in which all of us were the executioners. It was their job, but it was our sin that crucified Jesus that day.

Jesus died around 3 p.m. Now someone had to decide what to do with his body. Two secret followers of Jesus did something amazingly bold. They claimed his body and risked their own lives in the process. One was Joseph, a rich man from the little town of Arimathea. The other was a

prominent leader in Jerusalem named Nicodemus. They both had a lot to lose. Jesus had powerful and prominent enemies. Everyone associated with him was at risk. They could lose their prominence, lose their money and lose their lives. And, at that point, it did not appear that Jesus had much to offer in return. He was dead! Here is what it says in John 19:38-42:

... Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews. With Pilate’s permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus’ body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

Touching a dead body is not something most people choose to do. There were many reasons why these two prominent men would not have done it. First of all, in first century Israel women prepared bodies for burial. In addition, prominent men did not prepare bodies for burial. And, Jewish religious teaching said that anyone who touched a dead body was temporarily disqualified from participation in worship. This was one of the highest, holiest days of the Jewish calendar, the Festival of Passover, from which they would be excluded. But, they did it anyway out of respect for Jesus.

Can you picture this? Un-nailing his body from the cross, carrying it to the gravesite, washing it off, wrapping it up in linen cloth and then laying it in the tomb. I don’t think there was a moment of disgust in what they did, but I do think there was probably a profound sadness. Their Teacher, Friend, Savior and Messiah was dead. They thought they were burying their hope in that tomb with Jesus’ body.

Although Jesus predicted that he would come back to life again, no one really expected that to happen. But three days later that is exactly what happened. Jesus came back to life again. It was the biggest miracle God had ever done. It still is the biggest and best miracle of history. It proved everything—that Jesus was the Son of God as he said he was, that his death on the cross really worked to save people from sin and eternal death and that God could give life after death to everyone who believes in Jesus! Here’s what happened according to John 20:10-18:

Then the disciples went back to their homes, but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus’ body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

They asked her, “Woman, why are you crying?”

“They have taken my Lord away,” she said, “and I don’t know where they have put him.” At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

“Woman,” he said, “why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?”

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.”

Jesus said to her, “Mary.”

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher).

Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them all that he had said these

things to her.

Mary was not an easy believer that first Easter morning. She assumed Jesus was dead and would always be dead. When she found that his body was missing it never occurred to her that he had come back to life again. She blamed the gardener for taking him. Her tears blurred her vision. She did not recognize Jesus until he spoke her name: “*Mary!*” When she heard his voice she not only believed but she hugged Jesus. He was alive! Really alive! Voice and body and everything! She hugged him and held him and never wanted to let him go again.

We who believe in Jesus understand some of Mary’s emotion. We share the excitement and thrill of Jesus’ resurrection. And when we hear Jesus call us by name we want to throw our arms around him and never let him go.

Mary was not the last one to touch Jesus that first Easter. When the eyewitness reports of Jesus’ resurrection started coming from everywhere there was one man for whom faith did not come easily. His name was Thomas.

He knew Jesus well. His closest friends insisted that Jesus was alive again. But it was very hard for Thomas to believe this was true. It was not that he didn’t want to believe, but he needed some evidence. He said that when he could touch Jesus’ hands and feet he would become a true believer. John 20:24-28 says:

Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!”

But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.”

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach

Just like Jesus to be open to inspection! Check him out. He always meets doubters more than halfway.

out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”

Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”

Just like Jesus! Just like Jesus to be open to inspection! Check him out. He always meets doubters more than halfway.

The record doesn't tell us whether Thomas actually touched Jesus' hands and side, but I hope he did. I hope he touched Jesus and felt where the nails were pounded in and where the soldier's spear cut in. What an indescribable privilege to not only believe in Jesus but to touch each place where the wounds of salvation left their scars.

What a contrast! Six different touches:

- . . . the traitor's kiss
- . . . the guards' punches
- . . . the soldiers' crucifixion
- . . . the secret followers' burial
- . . . Mary's hug
- . . . Thomas' inspection

If you could touch Jesus today, which touch would be your touch? Touch him with faith. Believe in Jesus who died on the cross and rose from the dead. Reach out and touch him as your Savior and Lord. Touch him and feel his touch. Receive the eternal embrace of Jesus Christ.

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