

“Show Me Your Hands”

John 20:24-29

Sermon Preached by Thomas P. Markey

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How many of you know the story of how you got your name?

Perhaps it is a family name, passed down from generation to generation. For others it might be a name of a close friend or relative. Maybe you’re named after a famous athlete, author, musician, actor, or actress? Or maybe, it was a last-minute decision, and you started your life nameless as those who were naming you debated what your name should be.

This has always been something I have been fascinated by – How individuals get their names.

As a parent, it has been both fun and stressful thinking and dreaming of names for our children. The way it has worked in our family is that I often throw out some really outlandish and unique names, Abbie then quickly counters with a swift and not-so-subtle “absolutely not,” and we then find a happy-medium that we both feel comfortable with.

The story of how I came to be named Thomas is one of my favorite family stories.

You see, I wasn’t supposed to be named Thomas. The way the story has been told to me, or better yet, the way I have remembered it, is that my parents were a bit indecisive about what they wanted to name me. As my due date was getting closer the top choices were: Duncan and Cullen.

Then, as the story goes, my dad went out to dinner with his good friend, Tom Brinkman. And, it was at that dinner that my dad had an epiphany – Let’s name him Thomas! Now, the way I like to tell the last part of the story is that my dad, while my mom was mid-labor, tricked her into naming me Thomas.

Either way, no matter how I actually came to be named Thomas, I suppose, whether it was the work of the Holy Spirit, divine intervention, or just God having a really good sense of humor, my being named Thomas has always seemed to be the perfect fit when it comes to my life of faith.

Beyond sharing the same name, the disciple who I have always most readily and most authentically identified with is that of Thomas.

We don't hear much from Thomas, in fact, it is only in the Gospel of John that we actually hear him talk.

We first hear from Thomas in Chapter 11. In the midst of explaining to the disciples that Lazarus had died, Jesus tells them they must make their way to "Judea again." The disciples are distraught. Jesus had been receiving death threats from Judea. To go back meant a sure death. The disciples try to convince him otherwise until Thomas speaks up and says, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."¹

We next hear from Thomas in Chapter 14. Jesus is beginning what scholars now call his "Farewell Discourses," as he begins to warn his disciples of his looming death and triumphant resurrection. As one might imagine, the disciples are again distraught, sad and grieving over the thought of losing their dear friend. Jesus says to them, "And you know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas speaks up again, though this time with far less certainty, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"²

Then, our final time hearing from Thomas comes from today's reading. He's missed out on Jesus' initial appearance to the disciples and so as they begin to tell him of Jesus' appearance, Thomas isn't buying it. He says, "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."³

Thomas' faith seems to have undergone quite the evolution from Chapter 11 to Chapter 20. He's gone from willing to sacrifice his life, to feeling lost along way, to complete and outright disbelief.

¹ John 11:16, NRSV.

² John 14:5, NRSV.

³ John 20:25, NRSV.

This journey – Thomas’ journey – resonates so deeply with my experience of faith.

You see, by the time I arrived at John Knox, my resume included a random assortment of weird and disjointed “jobs.” Nothing lasting much longer than 9 months. Nothing seemed to stick or, better yet, I never stuck around long enough for anything to get sticky. To top it off, I was a seminary dropout who had lasted a whopping one semester. The only real applicable experience I had was as a volunteer for youth ministries.

I had my Thomas moment of “let us go also!” – that was my failed attempt at seminary.

I had my Thomas moment of “Uh, which way are we going God?” – that was everything after my failed attempt at seminary.

I had my Thomas moment of “Nope. Nope. Nope. I don’t believe it.” – that too was everything after my failed attempt at seminary.

So it seems peculiar that I even ended up at John Knox. But, again, whether it was the work of the Holy Spirit, divine intervention, or just God having a really good sense of humor, I applied, I interviewed, and I accepted the position having no clue what I was doing and having no clue what was to come.

The only thing I really knew, or at least I thought I really knew, was that, for me, disbelief felt far easier and far more feasible than belief. So, while I loved the church, loved working with youth, loved talking and debating about theology, and loved diving deeply into scripture, it was going to take a miracle – a Jesus showing me his hands kind of miracle – to turn my disbelief into belief.

Yet, little did I know, that my arrival at John Knox was, in fact, the miracle. Jesus, through this place and this space, was showing me his hands all along.

He first showed me his hands through my final conversation with Lisa before I was offered the position. She called me to ask a simple, but pointed question, “Tom, I’m looking over your resume and, with my background in hiring folks, I’m concerned about one thing, how do we know you’re going to stay?”

It was the first time anyone had called me on my baggage, on my inability and unwillingness to stick things out when they got a bit difficult. Lisa's question challenged me and pushed me to think about what it meant for me to accept this position. Her question, though a bit unexpected, told me that this is a community of people – a family – that is predicated on care, compassion, commitment, and, most especially, love. Her question showed me that the family of John Knox Presbyterian Church is deeply connected through meaningful and authentic relationships. I was in – or, as Thomas might put it, let us go!"

So, I entered the doors of John Knox in September of 2013 and though I didn't see it at the time, Jesus' just kept appearing, showing me his hands over and over again.

Jesus' hands were shown to me through the warm and kind welcome I received from so many of you as I began my time here. You not only showed me the important things like where to get coffee and donuts, but you never once made me feel like an outsider. From the moment I began, I felt as if I had been a part of the John Knox family since the beginning.

Jesus' hands were shown to me through your grace and patience as I adapted and adjusted to being in a new space. You let me ask questions, make mistakes, and fumble and stumble all while you continued to encourage and reassure me.

Jesus' hands were shown to me through your delicious food. I learned early and often that no one – and I mean no one – does hospitality better than John Knox. Whatever the occasion is – an evening meal, a picnic, a luncheon, potluck, pitch-in, big, or small – you make certain that *everyone* is taken care of, that *everyone* has a plate, and that *everyone* has someone to sit with. And, Sandy Jordan is always certain to make sure that the sweet tea has been made.

Jesus' hands were shown to me at the bottom of a dunk tank as Frank, Fernando, and I took turns being plunged into the water by far too many of you who were far too eager to see us not only get wet, but suffer mild hypothermia along the way.

I have witnessed the hands of Jesus through your adaptability and flexibility. There isn't a thing that can shake you – not even a power outage during VBS.

I have witnessed the hands of Jesus through your profound generosity. I never once saw a need that wasn't met. It was you all that taught me the true meaning of what faithful stewardship truly looks like.

I have witnessed the hands of Jesus through your profound commitment to the church – choir members, praise band singers and musicians, Presbyterian Women, church school teachers, deacons, elders, trustees, ushers, greeters, liturgists, crib room helpers, CIW leaders, counters, soundboard assistants, PowerPoint clickers, and fill-in secretaries.

I have witnessed the hands of Jesus through your faithful dedication to fun and festivities as I've watched so many of you volunteer countless hours of your time and energy to ensure that VBS, the Fall Festival, the Easter Festival, the Christmas Program, and the Community Picnic not only happen, but continue to be successful and fruitful.

I have witnessed the hands of Jesus through your relentless pursuit of relationship with one another. Small talk on Sunday mornings. Weekly breakfast gatherings. Lunch after church. Dinner dates. Vacations together. Hospital visits. Phone calls to check-in. Cards. Letters. Emails. Facebook posts and messages. Prayer. You love each other unconditionally.

You revealed Jesus' hands to me through the profound ways in which you surround and support one another, celebrating together in times of great joy and grieving together in times of deep sadness.

You revealed Jesus' hands to me through your joyful, honest, authentic, and heartfelt worship each Sunday. Though, I am sorry – most especially to Lisa and Frank – to have spent the last five years putting you all through the pain of listening to me “sing.”

You revealed Jesus' hands to me through your love of laughter, showing me that a sense of humor is, in fact, a holy discipline, especially if you're talking to Harlan first thing on Sunday morning.

You revealed Jesus' hands to me through your constant, consistent, and unwavering support of me as I made my way through seminary and the ordination process. Applauding me and cheering me all the way to the finish line, while also lovingly and graciously offering much

needed and much appreciated feedback – I’m still working on talking louder and speaking slower!

You revealed Jesus’ hands to me through your love and care of Abbie, Ella, and Eden. You have loved, supported, and celebrated Abbie in all that she does, never putting unrealistic or unfair expectations on her. You have loved and cared for Ella and Eden as if they were your own children. You took the baptismal vows you made serious, guiding and nurturing Ella and Eden, establishing a foundation of faith in their lives that I will forever be grateful for.

You revealed Jesus’ hands to me through your invitation into the sacred spaces of your lives – births, deaths, loss, grief, change, and transitions.

I have seen Jesus’ hands through two incomparable and incredible mentors – Lisa and Frank. Two people who saw and recognized a call on my life long before I ever did. Two people who have poured their lives into mine – nurturing, guiding, teaching, leading, and challenging me. Two people who have – over-and-over again – selflessly shared their time and given their energy to ensure that I was always learning and growing. They’ve taught me not only what it means to be a pastor, but what it means to be a spouse, a parent, and a friend. Lisa and Frank have taught me how to lead with integrity, humility, and authenticity. They’ve shown me the value of being a life-long learner. They’ve taught me the value of taking risk, how to celebrate success and learn from failure. They’ve taught me the importance of setting boundaries and empowering others. They have – which is likely the greatest miracle of all – helped me to become marginally competent at tracking and maintaining a budget! But, above all, Lisa and Frank have taught me how to live gratefully and love generously in all that I do.

I have seen Jesus’ hands through an extraordinary and unparalleled group of youth, a group of youth who had no reason to accept me, yet they did. They invited me to be a part of their safe and sacred space. You have shown me what the radical, all-inclusive love of Jesus really looks like. You have shown me what it really means to embark on this journey of faith, showing me that it is a journey that is best done with others, with constant curiosity, a lot of questions, and a spirit of joy, laughter, and fun. You have shown me how to paint an “accent wall” in a youth room. You have shown me that having a plan is, in fact, an OK thing to do. You have shown me

that I rarely stay on track and staying on topic is, in fact, once again, an OK thing to do. You have shown me what building real, authentic, and trusting relationships is all about. You have shown me what it means to live into your most real and authentic identity. You have held me accountable. You have challenged me and pushed me. You have supported me and celebrated me. You have, above all, amazed me. You have inspired me. You have forever changed me. You have shown me that you're not simply the "future of the church," but that you *are* the church. Please, don't ever stop being you.

John Knox Presbyterian Church.

This is a name I will never forget.

A place I will always hold close.

A family that I will take with me forever.

Thank you for showing me how to believe. I love you all. Thanks be to God. Amen.