

Easter 2A 2017, April 23, 2017. Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, Pa., Kurt S. Strause

The batter steps up to the plate, takes a few swings. The pitcher sets to throw. He pitches a hanging curve ball just on the edge of the plate. The batter swings and the ball sails over the left field fence, just inside the foul pole. He takes his bases and is greeted in the dugout by his team mates. High fives all around, fist bumps and arm touches in celebration.

The president and prime minister gather in the Rose Garden of the White House to sign an historic trade agreement after months of long and tense negotiations. Pens scribe their signatures to the important documents. They rise and shake hands, a symbolic gesture of their respective countries' growing friendship while photographers flash their cameras recording the event for the world and history.

A couple stands in front of family and friends in church. The pastor invites them to face each other and hold each other's hands. They make promises to one another of fidelity, support and love, promises to last a lifetime.

We see these ways in which human beings touch one another as positive and joyful. Some of the touch is highly ritualized and expected in society. We expect presidents to shake hands when countries are friendly. We want to see couples who are getting married hold hands, a sign to us of their love and affection for one another.

One human being touching another is what we might call a "visible word." We see in a touch, we feel in a touch, a particular message. A handshake or a big bear hug tells us we are welcomed home, welcome into the fold, into community.

In just the same way a touch can communicate negative messages. We teach our children and grandchildren the differences between "good touch" and "bad touch." A suggestive and inappropriate touch can destroy authentic human relationship and sometimes scar a person for life. A slap across the face, a blow struck in anger; these too are visible words, tangible words communicating hatred and even fear

A touch can heal what once was broken. An arm around a shoulder, an embrace of reconciliation, a hand held out signaling a new moment and an open future. The past is now a past, forgotten and irrelevant to what is now ahead.

A touch can also be dangerous and risky. Those hands clasped at marriage pledging faithfulness and love are taking on enormous risk, binding oneself to another in health and illness, fortune and poverty, for better or worse. Who knows what the future will bring: happiness, struggle, heartache?

Among the community of believers we engage in a ritualized touch called the "Passing of the Peace." Some see this as an opportunity to greet one's neighbor sitting close by. We touch each other, a handshake, sometimes an embrace. Passing the Peace is more than a greeting of welcome, though it certainly is also that. Here, inside this worship space and inside this worship service we don't pass just any peace. We pass the peace of Jesus, the risen Lord. And the peace Jesus gives is both healing and risky, life affirming and dangerous at the same time.

To communicate the reality of his rising from the dead Jesus invites his disciples to touch him. "Touch me and see:" Jesus says, "for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." Obviously that's what someone must have thought they were seeing; a ghost. No, touch me. I am real. I am me. I am risen.

Reach out and touch the risen Lord. Touching him is both healing and dangerous. Touching the divine is something you do at your own risk. It's like trying to lasso a tornado, or riding a wild African lion. But the touch is healing. As healing as finding a cure for cancer, or

being reconciled with an estranged family member.

You can see how risky and healing it is to touch Jesus by listening to one who did. Our first reading today gives us a sermon. Peter preaches to a crowd shortly after Pentecost. The contrast between Peter and the other disciples just a few short weeks before and the time he preached this sermon couldn't be more stark. You remember how he was. The night of the resurrection Peter was cowering behind locked doors, fearful for his own life. Now, he stands up publicly, boldly proclaiming to his fellow Jews that this Jesus, crucified and killed, is now bodily raised by God from the dead. Jesus' touch changed Peter; wildly, dangerously. The man who cowardly denied Jesus now becomes a bold witness. Peter took a risk, touching the risen Lord. It was a dangerous, healing touch. Peter's life ended giving witness to the risen Lord. He too was crucified as was Jesus. Yes, Peter was healed. His Lord forgave him the betrayal he committed. Peter lived repentant and forgiven. But that healing touch changed Peter forever.

Touching the risen Lord took Peter, and Thomas, and the rest of those disciples to surprising and unexpected places. In the world in which they lived it was often risky and dangerous. So risky that many lost their lives as witnesses to their faith in the risen Christ. Peter himself speaks of suffering various trials in the letter he wrote which we heard as our second reading today. But the power of the risen Jesus, his continued life and presence among the community of faith provided them with the faith and courage to go out into that dangerous world and offer the healing touch of Christ.

Today it may not seem as though the touch of the risen Christ is dangerous and risky. It's easy for us to go in and out of that locked room with the other disciples. When the early church gathered for worship only those who had really committed themselves to Christ in promises of faith were allowed to pass the peace with one another. Others who had not yet become Christian were dismissed from worship after hearing the scriptures and the sermon. To hold out one's hand in a gesture of Christ's peace to another Christian was to pledge your entire life, to stand by another in suffering and persecution when that time came. If it seems like little more than a friendly handshake today then I suspect that's because we rarely see our faith in Jesus as entailing any real risks at all.

Yet that's indeed what we do when we reach out to one another and pass the peace of Jesus. We declare our commitment and support of one another and in that touch we do indeed take great risks. For we say to one another that when you suffer we all suffer, and when you rejoice we all rejoice. When someone new joins our fellowship and our community of faith we embrace them as though they were a long lost relative, restored to table and family.

But like Peter and the rest of the disciples that peace is not confined to a closed room with locked doors. If the peace of Jesus resides only here, within these four walls, and is not carried out into the world it remains as a light under a bushel, or a treasure buried in a field. The healing, risky and dangerous touch of the resurrected Jesus will be felt by the world through his disciples, through the community of faith. That means you and me. Our hands in service of the risen Lord.

The Good News today for you and me is that the risen Jesus touched you in Holy Baptism and you have the opportunity to continue to touch him today. Here, in his body and blood as he comes to us in his holy supper of forgiveness, and yes, even risky grace. Continue to touch the risen Lord, a touch that is both healing and dangerous. Amen.