

# Touching God

“Know God.”

John 20:26-28

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## Accusation

I ran into a young man at a community gathering in Southwest Michigan. He was the son of some pretty active members in the Hartford church; and had been one of those guys you hear about that got into the drug and then couldn't really get life together.

I was surprised when I saw him, because there was several times that I tried to help him and he had always seemed lost and couldn't quite get it together. But this time he was different. He'd lost that pasty and dazed look you often see when someone is hooked on something. In fact, he looked pretty healthy and bright-eyed.

So, I got to talking with him and learned that he had really turned things around. He said that he had met some Christians who told him about Jesus in a way he hadn't understood before and he gave his life over to Christ.

Completely.

And everything changed. He was finishing up some college he'd started a long time before; he had a job. He was going places.

Then he looked at me sharply and said something that sounded a lot like an accusation. “You know,” he said, “I grew up in the Methodist Church and I never heard those things. I never heard about giving your heart to Jesus; and I never heard about salvation. If I only had, maybe I wouldn't have been so messed up for all those years.”

I think I knew what he meant. I hadn't been hooked on drugs; but I did have some time apart from the church and had felt a little lost. And when I was dating Laura and she helped me to see that faith was not just about what you believe but what you commit, a whole new world of forgiveness and purpose opened up for me, too. That's when I wondered why the people at my church hadn't done their job for me.

After all, the church is supposed to be the place that you find faith that makes a difference in life. These are the people who are supposed to be custodians of the story and keepers of the claim of Jesus. They are supposed to tell you and convince you so that you've got it all together from the word go. Aren't they?

### Faith

If they are (maybe since I'm the pastor I should say *If we are*), it doesn't look like we are doing very well. Some studies were done on the millennial generation recently that say that the church is losing significant ground when you look at how the majority of young people who grew up in Mainline Protestant and Evangelical churches. 65% rarely or never pray and 38% almost ever pray by themselves. 65% rarely or ever go to worship services. 67% don't read the Bible.<sup>1</sup> Seven in ten Protestants between 18 and 30 years old who went to church growing up quit attending by the time they are 23. Almost all of them dropped out when something changed in their lives, like when they moved. Many of them were unhappy with the pastor or the people at church. More than half of them had some religious or political reason that went along with it.<sup>2</sup>

Some friends of ours whose kids grew up in the church said recently that their now young adult kids wouldn't darken the door of a church anymore. They'd be happy to do something with some group from church that are out to help people, like a work project in Appalachia or the Upper Peninsula or Detroit, but not if it had to do with worship or teaching the Christian Faith. I wonder, what happened to them?

Assuming the young adults we confirm today stay with the Faith and hang on in the church, why is it that they will be in a 15% minority?

Is it because they aren't being given something here? Or is it also because of something else?

In Jesus' day, there were no polls. There were no indicators of public trends and no surveys to measure the ebb and tide of popularity. Yet, the writer of John's Gospel gives a picture of people who went through the same kind of pressures we do. And they were apparently people who had a hard time believing.

It's Easter Sunday, still morning, and Mary Magdalene comes barging in the room full of a story about a gardener she saw outside Jesus' empty tomb; and how the

gardener turned out to be Jesus – resurrected after all. And none of them budged. They heard the story and yet they stayed locked up in the room, afraid.

Then they saw him. Jesus appeared right there in the room and spoke with them and turned their fear into joy. Yet, when Thomas heard of it he remained stuck. The Greek word that's used here is *apistos*, which doesn't really mean *doubt*, as the English translations all make it, but *unbelief*.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the way the story is told, it's not that he questions and doesn't trust; he just lacks what it takes to believe.

Now Thomas is with the rest and Jesus appears again. And here's the point of the story. He'd said that he needed to have the physical proof: he needed to see the print of the nails in Jesus' hands and be able to press his hand into the wound in Jesus' side. When Jesus appears, he speaks directly at Thomas and offers exactly what he said he needed.

Thomas is face-to-face with the Risen Christ: and that's all it takes. He doesn't have to put his hand into Jesus' side. In the presence, he's already touched God.

65%, 67%, 15%: none of this matters. He experiences Jesus, here, for himself. That's what it takes.

I knew the people of the Hartford Church where that young man had grown up. I'd like to tell him: I *know* they did too tell you the story. And when I stopped to think about my home church I had to admit it wasn't that they didn't tell me; it was that I just wasn't listening.

Both of us just had to come to the same place Thomas got to that evening in Jerusalem. Experience the Risen Christ for yourself.

When I think of it, I see where you can see him all around. Remember in class when Mr. Leenhouts told you how he could see Jesus in his parents and in a teacher and a judge who were members of this church? I bet you could see Jesus in him. You can get the presence of Jesus in the music you hear and the music of faith that you sing. You can get him in so many people who have been your Sunday school teachers and youth counselors and even admirers in the hallways of this place. You can see him when we receive Communion and when you laugh and talk and pray with each other.

You get his presence when you sit around the fire at camp and sing tell stories of faith.  
He's here.

Jesus said to Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." But  
in a way, all of us are able to see Jesus, still.

He's here all around, if you open yourself to notice.

### **See Him – Touch God**

Have you seen Jesus my Lord  
He's here in plain view  
Take a look open your eyes  
He'll show it to you

Have you ever look at the sunset  
With the sky mellowing red  
And the clouds suspended like feathers  
Then I say you've seen Jesus my Lord

Have you seen Jesus my Lord  
He's here in plain view  
Take a look open your eyes  
He'll show it to you

Have you ever stood at the ocean  
With the white foam at your feet  
Felt the endless thundering motion  
Then I say you've seen Jesus my Lord

Have you seen Jesus my Lord  
He's here in plain view  
Take a look open your eyes  
He'll show it to you

Have you ever looked at the cross  
With a man hanging in pain  
And the look of love in his eyes  
Then I say you've seen Jesus my Lord<sup>4</sup>

He's here all around you, if you open yourself to notice.

Open yourself to notice: I believe that's how even today and any day you can touch God.

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<sup>1</sup> Cathy Lynn Grossman, "Survey: 72% of Millennials 'more spiritual than religious,'" USA Today, April 27, 2010. [http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2010-04-27-1Amillfaith27\\_ST\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2010-04-27-1Amillfaith27_ST_N.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Cathy Lynn Grossman, "Young adults aren't sticking with church," USA Today, August 6, 2007. [http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2007-08-06-church-dropouts\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2007-08-06-church-dropouts_N.htm)

<sup>3</sup> Gail R. O'Day, The Gospel of John annotations. *The New Interpreter's Study Bible*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. © 2003. p 1949.

<sup>4</sup> *Have You Seen Jesus My Lord?* Words and Music by John Fischer. Produced by James E. Schaefer. Arranged by Clark Gassman. © 1970 by F.E.L. Publications, Ltd..