

Touch Here

*A Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter
John 20:19–31 with Acts 5:29–42 and 1 Peter 1:3–9*

On August 1, 2024, a thirty-two-year-old Wall Street Journal reporter named Evan Gershkovich stepped off a plane at Andrews Air Force Base after 494 days in a Russian prison. He was free — not because he'd talked his way out, not because he had good feelings about his situation, and certainly not because well-wishers had shouted encouraging words through the prison wall. He was free because an authorized exchange had been executed in a specific place, by specific people, with the legal standing to actually release him. The paperwork was signed. The words were spoken. The door opened. Vague goodwill didn't free him. A located, authoritative act did.

That is exactly what God is doing in his Word this morning — and exactly what most of us spend our whole lives getting wrong.

I. The Law - What Your Father Requires

Your Father in Heaven created you for something astonishing. Not mere survival, not comfort, not a decent moral record — but sonship, daughterhood, royalty. You are made to reign with Christ in glory over all creation. That inheritance carries a law worthy of it: love God with everything you are, love your neighbor genuinely, believe with your whole life, and be a bold witness to the resurrection in a world that desperately needs one. These commands are not bureaucratic fine print. They are the constitution of a kingdom — spectacularly, breathtakingly good.

II. The Sin - Looking in All the Wrong Places

And now, let us be painfully honest. The disciples, on that first Easter evening, were not worshipping. They were not boldly proclaiming anything. They had locked the door. Fear was louder than faith. We understand this immediately — we have been locking the same door our entire lives.

But here is the specific failure our texts expose today, the one we almost never name: *we don't know where to find forgiveness*. So we guess. We consult our feelings — *Do I feel forgiven today?* We audit our recent behavior — *Have I been good enough this week for God to be okay with me?* We rehearse comforting theological ideas in our heads — *God is love, surely I'm fine*. And we go home with nothing but a vague, anxious hope that it's probably alright.

Thomas said what the rest of us only think: *"Unless I see the nail marks — unless I put my finger where the nails were — I will not believe."* We say the same thing in different words every single week. We want certainty and we don't know where to get it, so we manufacture it out of moods and guesswork and spiritual performance. We do not love God with all our heart, because a heart perpetually unsure of its standing before God cannot love freely. It can only manage anxiety. We do not love our neighbors boldly, because a soul that isn't certain it is forgiven cannot give what it does not know it has.

The verdict stands. We are guilty — not only of the obvious sins, but of the quieter one: refusing to look for grace where God has actually placed it.

III. The Gospel - Jesus Locates His Forgiveness on Purpose

Then Jesus appears. Doors locked — he comes through anyway. And notice what he does first. He doesn't deliver a lecture. He doesn't ask for their spiritual performance report. He shows them his hands and his side. *Here. Look here. Touch here*. The wounds are not healed away in the resurrection — they are carried forward, glorified, permanent. Why? Because Jesus understands that you and I cannot live on abstractions. We need somewhere to put our hands.

He breathed on them — a new creation breath, the Spirit of God hovering over the deep again — and said: *"Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you retain them, they are retained."*

This is not a general announcement of goodwill. This is the Office of the Keys — the authority of heaven, delegated through the risen Christ, to his church, executed through called and ordained pastors, placed in a specific location so that no one ever has to guess again. Luther's Small Catechism puts it plainly: when the called ministers of Christ forgive the sins of the repentant, this is just as valid and certain in heaven as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us himself.

Jesus knew Thomas couldn't believe a floating idea. So he came back a second time, walked through the locked door again, and said: "*Put your finger here. See my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side.*" *Touch here.* And Thomas, who had barricaded himself behind a week of doubt, collapsed in the only possible response: "*My Lord and my God.*"

"Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy." — 1 Peter 1:8

Jesus has not left us without a "touch here." He has located his forgiveness in very specific places so that no one has to wander in anxiety, consulting their feelings, wondering if maybe God is okay with them today. When your pastor stands before you and speaks the words of absolution — *I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit* — Jesus himself is saying *touch here*. The voice is human. The authority is the same one that walked through locked doors and showed his wounds to a doubting man. When you come to this table and receive the body and blood of Christ given and shed for you — that is Jesus saying *touch here*. Personally. Specifically. To you. Your name is on the release papers. Not the congregation in general. You.

IV. The New Life - Free People Live Differently

The apostles in Acts 5 were dragged before the council, flogged, and commanded to be silent about Jesus. They left rejoicing. Not because they were extraordinary people — they were the same men who had locked themselves in a room a few weeks earlier. What changed? They had been given a located certainty. They had seen the wounds. They had received the Spirit. They knew exactly where they stood. And a person who knows where they stand can stand anywhere.

This is the life now available to you. Not a life of anxious moral auditing — *Am I forgiven today? Did I do enough? Does God approve?* — but a life launched from the solid ground of a declared verdict. The Holy Spirit is alive in you, reshaping you from the inside, conforming you to the image of Christ. When you love the difficult neighbor — the demanding, inconvenient one — you are not grinding through a rule. You are walking in the freedom of someone who has

been told, concretely and authoritatively, that they are no longer condemned. When you speak Jesus' name where it might cost you something, you confirm what you already know: you are a child of the King, and the King has signed the papers.

Your witness brings glory to God rather than disgrace. Your obedience is no longer about earning standing — it is the natural walk of a freed person. The Spirit is not stifled but welcomed. The transformation from self to God, from anxiety to peace, from fear to joy — it flows from this one certainty: *I know where my forgiveness is. I went there. I received it. It is mine.*

Conclusion - The Door Is Open

Evan Gershkovich wasn't freed by someone's sincere hope that he might be okay. He was freed by an authorized exchange, executed in a specific place, by people with actual standing to release him. The door opened because the right words were spoken by the right authority.

Jesus did not leave you to hope for the best. He went to the cross — specifically, historically, bodily. He rose again — specifically, with wounds you could touch. He breathed the Holy Spirit onto his church — specifically, with authority that reaches to heaven itself. And he put his forgiveness in a specific place, in the mouth of his called servant, and in the bread and cup on this table, so that you never have to guess. So that no amount of doubt or shame or locked-door fear can take this from you — because it doesn't depend on your feelings. It depends on him. And he has already spoken.

Touch here. Your sins are forgiven. Now walk out into the light. Amen.

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