

Second Sunday of Easter 2020 - Acts 2:14a, 22-32; John 20:19 - end

Acts 2:14a, 22-32

14 Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: 22 "Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. 23 This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men,[b] put him to death by nailing him to the cross. 24 But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. 25 David said about him:

"I saw the Lord always before me.

Because he is at my right hand,

I will not be shaken.

26 Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;

my body also will rest in hope,

27 because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead,

you will not let your holy one see decay.

28 You have made known to me the paths of life;

you will fill me with joy in your presence.'

29 "Fellow Israelites, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. 30 But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. 31 Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay. 32 God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it.

John 20:19-end

19 On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among

them and said, "Peace be with you!" 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

21 Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." 22 And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

24 Now Thomas (also known as Didymus[a]), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. 25 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."

26 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!" 27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

28 Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

29 Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

30 Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. 31 But these are written that you may believe[b] that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

SERMON

This has been the strangest Easter most of us will ever have experienced. But in spite of this - or maybe because of this, I've found much of the Easter story has really resonated with the situation we find ourselves in - you may have felt the same.

Today's reading from John's Gospel is no exception. Here we find a group of frightened disciples in "lock-down" together - unable to go out for fear that if the Jewish religious leaders recognise them as Jesus' friends they are likely to suffer imprisonment - or even death.

Of course, we are in lock down - afraid to venture too far for fear of an **invisible** enemy that may cause **us** to be totally imprisoned in our home, isolated in hospital or, in the worst case scenario, may result in our death.

Those disciples were no doubt feeling anxious, dejected and disillusioned. Though the women had tried to tell them they had seen the risen Lord, they remained unconvinced. So when Jesus came in it's hardly surprising they thought he was a ghost. He had to show them his wounds to convince them who he really was. Then, he greeted them with the words, "**Peace be with you**" and breathed into them the new life of the Holy Spirit. He commissioned them to preach the gospel and convey the message of God's forgiveness to all who were willing to repent.

Now, of course, those disciples were overjoyed. They had seen Jesus for themselves so now they could believe what the women had told them.

But one of the disciples missed out on this experience - Thomas wasn't with them. Maybe he just needed some breathing space. I feel for those of you who are locked-down on your own. But it isn't always easy to be cooped up with other people - no matter how much you care for each other! Or maybe Thomas was the one who had to pluck up his courage and go off to the 1st century version of the supermarket to stock up on provisions.

Wherever he'd been, when the other disciples greeted him with the news, "We have seen the Lord!" Thomas didn't share in their excitement. Instead, he told them that he wouldn't believe unless he had concrete proof - he didn't just want to **see** Jesus - he needed to see and to feel the marks of the nails in J's hands and the wound in his side.

And, because of this, Thomas has gone down in history as "Doubting Thomas". But does he deserve this label? After all, didn't the other disciples need to see Jesus and look at his wounds before **they** could believe?

It's so easy to label someone - but let's recall what we already know about Thomas. I tend to think of him as the blunt Yorkshire-man who calls a spade a spade and isn't fobbed off by fancy words. In the well-known passage we often hear at funerals Jesus told his disciples, "**In my Father's house are many rooms. I am going there to prepare a place for you. You know the way to the place where I am going.**" Well Thomas wasn't afraid of asking questions - he really needed to know what this meant. How could he know the way if he'd no idea where Jesus was going? If Thomas had kept quiet, we might never have had those wonderful words from Jesus, "**I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.**"

Then, when Jesus decided to go to Lazarus, the other disciples weren't too keen. They knew it was a dangerous mission. But Thomas urged them "**Let us also go, so that we might die with him.**" I think he deserves recognition for his honesty and bravery - not just his doubts.

In our society we can be pretty good at labelling people, but maybe, the past few weeks have caused us to reassess the way we think of people. There has always been a tendency to judge people on the basis of celebrity, social status, academic success and wealth. Now we

are recognising the value of so many people we've tended to take for granted - post men & women, delivery drivers, refuse collectors, cleaners, shop workers, care workers, farmers, others who work in food production, and, of course doctors, nurses and all who work for the NHS.

Thomas wanted to **experience** Christ's presence for himself. Maybe he needed to know that Jesus **valued him**, that he cared enough to reveal himself to HIM - maybe that's what he really doubted. A week later, Jesus again appeared in the same room, through the same locked doors, bringing the same greeting, "**Peace be with you.**" But this time there was a difference; as Jesus stood among the disciples, his interest was only in one person - Thomas. (**Painting**) Many times in the gospels we find Jesus singling out individuals; leaving the crowd to minister to just one person. Jesus always treats people as unique individuals - he treats **us** as unique individuals.

When Thomas saw him and heard his voice, he wasn't just convinced that Jesus had risen from the dead. He was convinced of something greater than this. He may have been the last of those disciples to believe Jesus had risen, but he was the first to address him as, "**My Lord and My God.**"

Thomas wasn't content with a second-hand faith, and none of us should be. Like Thomas, we all need a personal encounter with God. Jesus told him, "**Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and have yet believed.**"

The disciples were fortunate to encounter the risen Jesus first hand and they demonstrated the reality of the resurrection in both word and action. They were completely transformed from the frightened men who had hidden away behind locked doors. As we heard in our first reading from the book of Acts, they were empowered by the Holy Spirit to preach with boldness and to bring healing to others and many people were drawn to put their faith in Christ.

Jesus said, "**BLESSED are those who have not seen and yet have believed.**" We may not be able to see Jesus himself, but he still comes to us; he can still break through the locked doors of our doubts and fears. When Archbishop Justin Welby was asked where Jesus was in our current situation, he replied that Jesus is there with the doctors, nurses, all who are caring for those who are suffering. On Facebook I listened to the testimony of a man who had been in intensive care, praying for someone to come to him, when God sent him a cleaner - a cleaner who had actually been a missionary and who answered another prayer by later bringing him a can of cola and a packet of prawn cocktail crisps. Not what I'd pray for but God works in mysterious ways!

And Jesus still meets with us - through the friend who phones or writes; through the neighbour who offers to do our shopping; in the cheery greeting of the supermarket worker

or the compassion of a nurse - through the many acts of kindness and support that are taking place in our communities now.

We too can show others that Jesus is alive, that his Spirit is with us, through the things we do and say. We can offer to pray, we can share the hope that is ours through the One who died for us and rose again.

Prayer of St Benedict

O gracious and holy Father,
Give us wisdom to perceive you,
diligence to seek you,
patience to wait for you,
and a life to proclaim you,
through the power of the spirit of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.