



**Sermon preached by Revd Deborah McVey on Low Sunday -
11th April 2021**

Readings: Isaiah 65: 17-25, Acts 4: 23-37, John 20: 19-30

Reflection

O God we thank you for Thomas, and all the disciples who followed in your way. Come to us today in your risen power and enable us through your Spirit to believe those things of you that we struggle with, that through believing we might have life in your name, and share this life with others. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

We come again on Low Sunday to ponder the story of Thomas. Every year he comes to challenge and inspire us, to give us courage in times of unbelief. Thomas was the one who dared to ask those questions of Jesus that perhaps the others disciples wanted to ask but held back. He had courage. He was the one who when Jesus told them where he was going, told him in no uncertain terms that he didn't know and how could he know; then heard those words from Jesus, "I am the way, the truth and the life." How thankful we are for Thomas.

It is such a familiar story: here they are, the Lord has risen yet the disciples gathered in fear and trembling in a room with locked doors. Jesus comes amongst them, offers his peace as indeed he does on many occasions after his resurrection, and they are amazed and reassured. But Thomas isn't there! Thomas, the disciple with humanity, natural caution, often labelled the Doubter, but I wonder if that is a misnomer? Thomas is real, he displays such characteristics as we see in those around us, even admit to ourselves at times. Because Thomas was missing that first time Jesus came back into that locked room, knowing Thomas' specific need. A definition of healing from the writing of Bishop Morris Maddocks is this: "Jesus Christ meeting us at our point of need." Thomas needed to see him, to touch him, to believe Jesus was truly physically present. That's all he needed and then he would believe. He needed Jesus' presence and touch.

Bodies are important in this encounter as they are in every meeting between human beings. Through Jesus' invitation to touch his pierced hands and side, signs of his risen humanity, Thomas's faith in him as God is reawakened (vv. 27, 28). Such faith releases us into life (v.31). It is incarnational; because God-in-Christ is human such faith is possible, and continues to be accessible to us. The fact that Thomas, like his friends, saw and believed, is the foundation for the faith of all who would come later. We are transformed by the transformation of Thomas and are thankful for him. Jesus always came to his disciples where they were; he comes to us wherever we are. His Holy Spirit gives us exactly what we need in any given situation. Here he gives what is most needed, peace in the face of fear. *'Peace be with you.'* (John 20.19-31):

Whenever the disciples encounter the risen Jesus, his first words are a sharing of peace. On the Emmaus road in the breaking of the bread, as in this locked room on two occasions, this is the way they recognise Jesus. Here space is created for Thomas to express his honest concern and questing and utter his great statement of faith. *'My Master! My God!'*

The Holy Spirit is not only given for personal comfort and blessing but for the sake of the whole of humanity. *'If you forgive someone's sins, they are gone for good. If you don't forgive sins, what are you going to do with them?'*

In the Epistle for today from 1 John, words we heard in part for our confession and words of forgiveness, human sin as a fact of life is recognised and Jesus is presented as the provider of atonement. At-one-ment with God held out by God for us all. Jesus' death was for the whole of humanity. Whatever theory of the atonement, Jesus' suffering and death we most resonate with, and it is different for each of us, we need to come to some understanding that chimes deep within us for an event which is as brutal as crucifixion. I am sure God loved us so much that God's very self in Jesus was prepared to go to such lengths in love for us, there was no limit to this love, in going to his crucifixion. It was for us. I believe that God's very self was in that place, God-in-Christ's own body, present on that cross. Human and divine, this is a God prepared to suffer; in Jesus, fully God, fully human.

Even in the face of something so cruel and immense, we can feel love and joy flowing from such an event, the horror turns to joy when we think of the resurrection. Joy, love and life which we can ourselves claim, as we go in the strength of the Lord, to live lives which reflect such glory. The gospel writer John includes the story of Thomas, to make the point that we do not need to see the risen Jesus but can meet him through faith because he is God.

Any understanding of the resurrection has ethical consequences. In the reading from the book of Acts the vision is held out to us of the early believers' commitment to sharing, *they held all goods in common*. The resurrection of Jesus caused such an impact that the early community of Christians knew real change in their lives, holding all things in common. Those who were needy were provided for. In every age and context there is an ethical edge to the resurrection. Are we changed by this event for the way we live our lives? Such a life-changing and cataclysmic event demands our soul, our life, our all. Our threefold commitment in Downing Place to sustainability, inclusion and wellbeing with a focus which is personal, local, national and global springs from our desire to view the risen Christ in every activity we pursue. Resurrection belief transforms; others as well as ourselves. Nothing can be the same again!

We cannot see the risen Jesus, or can we? Yes, through the gospel writers' stories, the living words of scripture, the enrichment we experience of closeness to God in worship, the lives of people of faith who have touched our lives, those who by their integrity and living of the gospel conveyed the truths of faith to us, all these ways bring Jesus to life. I wonder if the faith we live out will translate with integrity and conviction to the generations that follow us? When each one of us in our own way can echo Thomas' statement of faith, "My Lord and My God", how many others will come to their own conviction about the resurrection and the empty tomb?

Bring to mind the stories, not only from the Bible, but from the lives which have touched you so much that the gospel leaps into life. The elderly woman, bedbound for several months, who is a delight to visit for her vibrancy of faith which is still unwavering despite not knowing quite which moment she is living in. The peace of Christ comes to her to give her peace and flows from her to give that same peace to those who visit. Our willingness to share fears and at times fragile faith, may surprise us into new life and firm conviction. Such is the wonder of the ways the Holy Spirit of God works for good. I will never forget those parents I met in the children's wards at Addenbrooke's who drew courage from their youngsters, courage which enabled them to hang on in hope and belief in the future, when the present appeared bleak. When those around them are able to convey hope and peace there is often transformation. Peace multiplies.

We, like Thomas, will be deeply and genuinely touched by the resurrection, when we dare to express our puzzlement about life and faith. Daring to ask those questions doesn't mean our faith is any the less but that we are being real about those times of suffering which lean in

upon us. But with trust and the encouragement of others we can be resilient people, those who may be dented a little by suffering but who gradually come back into shape again, albeit in a different shape with those precious scars which pay tribute to the experiences we have lived through.

Suffering can be transcended in a creative way, in a way which ultimately gives glory to God and courage to those who accompany us. When we genuinely care, we also keep in perspective the suffering of the whole human race; pouring out prayer and care in this way will lead not only to another's well being but to our own as well.

We might ask then, how might we best help in situations of disaster? Can we keep the practical to the fore? It has been so hard in this last year of pandemic, yet there have been ways. Quietly offering prayer, baking a treat, sending cards to grandchildren, perhaps helping with home schooling, giving parents encouragement for their tough task; some of these ways of showing care have been the most helpful. Sometimes it's been hard keeping the momentum for caring when we have felt lacking in energy ourselves at the long slow months of the pandemic. Even with faith it has at times been hard to be hopeful as we look at the world around. Then we remember those words of Thomas, the reality for him of seeing his Lord, his God. In our imagination we reach out to hold those loved ones we cannot see or touch, and pray for the peace of Christ to fill the emptiness. Like Thomas we are changed. The peace which filled him, fills us and we can give out to others again.

Believe that we are part of transformation, because that is what the resurrection offers to us and to all people. There may well be something of Thomas in all of us. In welcoming Thomas, we can try to share his new perspective and let the resurrection transform us in all sorts of unexpected ways. Then we will come to exclaim with Thomas 'My Lord and my God' and like him be part of the proclamation of the gospel not only with our lips but in our lives.