



Sermon preached by Revd Dr Ian Randall on 27th April 2025

Readings: *Revelation 1:4-8, John 20:19-31*

First Sunday after Easter

In our Gospel reading, it has been one week since Easter, one week since the excitement and the chaos, one week since the empty tomb. And the disciples are behind locked doors.

What difference has the empty tomb made?

There is a process here. What we have in our reading is a communal experience. In John there have been appearances of the risen Lord, but not to the whole group of disciples. They now meet Jesus in the presence of one another, as we do today.

The story of the resurrection in our experience might have some parallels. What were the disciples feeling? Individually there was some fear, confusion, uncertainty – but all of these are the places Jesus enters. And so there can be joy and celebration.

The walls and the locked doors of the place where they were could not keep Jesus out. And the walls and locked doors of our houses and hearts will not keep him out. But he wants to be invited.

Jesus comes not to confront his disciples with their failures, but to grant them peace. His greeting, 'Peace be with you', has the sense of the Hebrew greeting *shalom*, a blessing that has within it more than an unruffled life, but rather a deep and holistic sense of well-being - the kind of peace the world cannot give (John 14:27). I used to see this in my years in hospital chaplaincy.

And Jesus shows his disciples his hands and his side, so that they can see that it is he, the real, flesh-and-blood, crucified Jesus - not a ghost or apparition or wish-fulfilment - who is before them. The disciples respond - they are overjoyed. Again, Jesus speaks a blessing of peace and tells them, 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' And he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'.

This is not yet Pentecost, but what is important is that the Holy Spirit is not to be separated from Jesus himself. Indeed the Spirit comes from the cross.

I've been reading *Hope*, the autobiography of Pope Francis. On the day of his ordination, when he was sent into ministry, he wrote a prayer which he has continued to use. It begins:

I want to believe in God the Father, who loves me as a son, and in Jesus, the Lord, who has poured out his Spirit in my life – to make me smile – and to bring me to the kingdom of eternal life.

I believe in my life story, which has been penetrated by God's loving gaze, and that has led me to the encounter when I am invited to follow him.

Then, going back to our gospel narrative, Jesus tells his disciples, 'If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained'. Hard on the heels of Pope Francis this might seem to relate to the Catholic Confessional. But in John's Gospel 'sin' is not primarily a moral category. It is fundamentally unbelief, the refusal to receive the loving revelation of God in the person of Jesus.

I suggest that Jesus is not giving his disciples some special power to decide whose sins will be forgiven and whose will not. He is explaining what it means to be sent, to make known the love of God. As people come to know and follow Jesus, they will be 'released' from their sins. But we have a responsibility. It's possible for various reasons - including that we don't always live as we should - people remain without faith.

The wonderful passage in Revelation that we read has a picture of Jesus, risen from the dead, who has freed us from our sins and made us a kingdom of priests. Our responsibility is also our privilege. We are part of a movement that is focussed on Jesus, the first and the last, the Alpha and Omega.

As well as research and writing on Elizabeth Hewat¹, I've been writing on Roy Whitehorn, who was closely associated with this church. He was Professor of Church History at Westminster College, and then College Principal. He had a vision of the wide spread of the good news of Jesus, having had experience of international and national ministry. In 1947, in Westminster Chapel, London, Roy Whitehorn delivered a visionary address as the annual sermon on behalf of the London Missionary Society. It was entitled "The gospel wherein we stand". The church, he maintained, has as its priority the "proclamation of the gospel". Other valuable things are done "which are the fruits of the activity of the Spirit". But for all Christians there is a clear message from Whitehorn: "If we forget the gospel then we fail."

In 1947 and 1949 Roy Whitehorn preached the Cambridge University sermon, in 1949 from John 3:7, on the new birth by the Spirit. He spoke about the "converted life" and asked how this was sustained. Not mainly by our efforts, he replied, though "we work out our own salvation", but "the Spirit helpeth us in our infirmities". Our weaknesses. This sense of infirmity or weakness leads to the passage in our reading about Thomas.

What about this supposed Doubting Thomas? We know from the Gospels that Thomas was a man determined to follow his Master right to the end. When Jesus said they had to visit Lazarus, Thomas said 'Let's go and die with him'. Not an ironic, or pessimistic, or fatalistic statement. But serious.

Now in the next meeting of the disciples he wanted to see Jesus' wounds. Tomas Halik, the Czech theologian, in his book *Touch the Wounds*, says that Thomas wanted to be sure that the resurrection did not empty the cross of its meaning. Maybe Thomas had a more profound insight than others.

Jesus showed him – wounds remain wounds.

Halik, who we heard in Prague when we lived there, and recently in Cambridge at a wonderful conference with Rowan Williams, has great respect for different journeys that people make, but this is core for him – I am incapable of uttering the words 'My God' unless I see the wounds.

So, Thomas is Confessing Thomas. My Lord and my God! With those words Thomas has recognized and named a new relationship, a new worldview, a new way of being. It has to do with wounds.

Maybe you know what is said about the end of Thomas' story? There is good evidence that he was the apostle to the people of India. He brought the gospel of Christ to India. He died a martyr. He was literally wounded, as Jesus was wounded.

We are called to walk this way, to be ready for suffering, but with that to be open to the power of the Spirit, and to know resurrection life.

Ian Randall
27th April 2025

¹ Elizabeth Hewat (1895-1968) - missionary, and campaigner for women's equality in the Church of Scotland,