

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 11th April 2021
The second Sunday of Easter

Collect

Risen Christ,
for whom no door is locked, no entrance barred:
open the doors of our hearts,
that we may seek the good of others
and walk the joyful road of sacrifice and peace,
to the praise of God the Father.
Amen.

Acts 4:32-35

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

John 20:19-end

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Sermon by John Richardson

Each year on this first Sunday after Easter we come face to face with Thomas; or, as he is usually known, doubting Thomas. He is the one disciple who is not prepared to accept what the other disciples tell him. He wants to see for himself. He wants proof that Jesus has risen from the dead. So he has become known as “doubting Thomas”. And we still use the phrase to describe someone who will not believe what they have not seen for themselves.

Every year we tend to focus on “doubt” when we hear this story. But, of course, this story is not really about doubt at all - it’s about faith and how we come to it.

Every one of us has his or her own story about how we came to faith. And every one of us has the same problem. Once we’ve got it, how do we hold on to it? There are so many things that shake our faith and make us question it. Every day of our lives we are confronted by something that calls our faith into question. Death, innocent suffering, injustice, inequality, natural disasters.

On Easter Day we celebrated and rejoiced in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. It was a day of thanksgiving to God; a day to marvel and wonder at the mystery and wonder of God coming into the world in the person of Jesus; of God giving of himself so that we might experience new life and live for him and for one another. But acceptance of this new life and all that it brings requires faith on our part. It requires a response from us.

When I think about my own faith journey, there are three questions I keep coming back to me:

- The first is “**Why** should I do it?”
- The second is “**What** am I being asked to do?”
- The third is “**How** am I going to do it?”

These are not questions I can answer once and for all and then put them behind me. They keep coming back to me.

Let’s look at each of these three questions:

First, “**Why** should I do it?”

How would you answer that?

You might say: because I’ve always been a Christian or because my parents were and they made me one. Or you might say it’s because I have decided for myself that belief in God and in Jesus makes sense amongst all the possible ways of looking at this life. It’s something that gives meaning and purpose to my life. It’s the one way in which I believe I can make a difference in the world. And so on.

Secondly, “**What** am I being asked to do?”

This is where it gets a bit more difficult. We have to start with that word “belief”? I am being asked to accept a set of propositions about God and Jesus which are set out for us in the creed. Some of these propositions are not too difficult. Others I might have a problem with. And then there are those bits we call commandments. Loving God and my neighbour sounds easy enough, but when I try and do it I find it’s not so easy sometimes. But that’s the bottom line, so I’ve got to do my best.

Thirdly, “**How** am I going to do it?”

This is where it gets even more difficult. I know I can’t do it in my own strength. I’m going to need help. Loving God and others presents me with all kinds of difficulties. Immersing myself in the troubles of the world can lead me into all sorts of places where I might not want to be. It’s going to take a lot of courage and effort if I’m going to do it properly.

These are necessary questions in my faith journey. The answers I come up with will depend on my circumstances as well as what’s going on in the world around me. Where can I look for help?

Unsurprisingly, the beginnings of an answer to all three questions can be found in today’s Gospel.

First, Jesus appears to his disciples and greets them with the common Jewish greeting “Shalom” - peace. He goes on to identify himself. He is the crucified Jesus. He shows them his hands and his side. The reaction of the disciples is one of rejoicing. This is what Jesus had said would happen. Their pain would be turned into joy. And here we have the beginnings of an answer to our question why? It is because Jesus has risen and brought us the possibility of new life in him. He has defeated the powers of evil and shown us that nothing can overcome the power of love. And that’s something worth knowing and holding on to. It tells us **why** we set out on our faith journey.

Secondly, Jesus tells the disciples he has been sent by the Father - in fact, we hear this no less than forty-one times in John’s Gospel, so it must be important. Jesus has been sent into the world to reveal God, to teach, to heal, to gather disciples. He’s already told them that one reason he’s there is to send out disciples to continue his ministry. So he commissions the disciples to carry on his work. Now we know **what** we are meant to be doing on our faith journey.

Thirdly, the disciples receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. It’s what we might call John’s Pentecost. According to John, the gift of the Spirit is given on the evening of Easter Day itself, not on Pentecost some seven weeks later, as Luke tells us. The disciples are commissioned and given the Spirit as a gift that will empower them to witness to Christ in the world. That’s how the work of Jesus will be carried on. That’s **how** we are empowered in our own journey of faith to continue his work in the world.

To go back to Thomas.

On our journey of faith, proof is the one thing we cannot have.

- There is no proof that God exists.
- There is no proof that Jesus rose from the dead.
- There is not proof that if you put your trust and faith in God you will experience life in heaven.

Faith is not certainty based on observable facts. It is trust grounded in the reality of God and in our experience of that reality. The end of this chapter in John finishes with the words: “...and these things are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. Amen.