

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 19th April 2020
2nd 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 2:14a, 22-32

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them:

‘You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know— this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. For David says concerning him,

“I saw the Lord always before me,
for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken;
therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced;
moreover, my flesh will live in hope.
For you will not abandon my soul to Hades,
or let your Holy One experience corruption.
You have made known to me the ways of life;
you will make me full of gladness with your presence.”

‘Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying,

“He was not abandoned to Hades,
nor did his flesh experience corruption.”

This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses.

John 20:19-31

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

Some of you will know that I have always been a bit ambivalent about the term “Christian”. In fact before I was ordained I almost never referred to myself as a Christian. Part of the reason was an anxiety about being associated with beliefs that some Christians hold and I do not, or some of the more zealous behaviours. I never wanted people to fear that if they found themselves in a room with me I would bang on about Jesus. But I think there was also a fear of people expecting me to be a constantly and consistently “good” person that just felt like too much pressure. Now that I wear a dog collar there’s nowhere to hide, and I often wonder what people make of it if I *don’t* buy a Big Issue or more worryingly when they lip read some of the words that come out of my mouth when behind the wheel of a car.

If you, like me, have ever felt like you might not always live up to what it means to be a follower of Christ, this morning’s gospel reading is for you. Many of us have a secret liking for those moments in the gospels when the disciples get things spectacularly wrong. It gives us hope. And the hope offered in this morning’s reading is of particular significance.

Let’s take a look at the story a little more closely – and also remind ourselves of what has come before it. You will remember that in last week’s reading we heard that Mary Magdalene was the first to discover that the stone had been rolled away from the tomb. She ran to tell Peter and John that Jesus was no longer in the tomb, and they both ran back to the tomb. John, apparently, saw the empty tomb and believed, whereas we hear no more of Peter. Both return home. Mary, meanwhile, remains at the tomb, to encounter first two angels, and then Jesus himself who she doesn’t recognise until he addresses her by name. She recognises that she has seen the Lord.

In this morning’s reading, we hear of two occasions when Jesus appears to the disciples. The first, on the night following his resurrection, Thomas is not present. Jesus appears to the disciples in a locked room, declares “peace be with you”, and sends them out, commissioning them by breathing the Holy Spirit onto them and declaring that they have the power to forgive sins. On the second occasion, Thomas is present, and, having not believed the testimony of his fellow disciples, is singled out by Jesus to place his hands in Jesus’s wounds. This gives him the evidence he needs to declare, “my Lord and my God.”

So why is it that these particular stories are so full of hope, no matter how inadequate we may feel our discipleship to be?

The story of Thomas is, of course, one obvious reason. Whether or not he deserves his soubriquet “Doubting Thomas”, he probably speaks for a fair few of us when he doesn’t want to take the other disciples’ word for it. He’s not asking for more proof than they’ve had – he just wants to see for himself. In his previous appearances, Thomas has been equally independent minded. My particular favourite is when Jesus is telling his disciples that they know the way to the place he is going, and Thomas says what we can probably assume all of the disciples are thinking: that he *doesn’t* know the way, so Jesus needs to be clearer.

As a person who questions, Thomas is indeed a comforting figure to have in the scriptures. But we find the hope by keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus. Let me explain. The power of Thomas’s story isn’t what Thomas says and does, but rather how Jesus responds. We hear what Jesus already knows: that Thomas, who was not there when Jesus first appeared to his disciples, won’t believe in the

resurrection unless he sees it with his own eyes. And what does Jesus do? He appears again. He singles out Thomas – not with anger or frustration; not with pity or incredulity; not with criticism or derision – but with love. He knows what Thomas needs, and he offers it without fuss.

It's exactly what he did with Mary Magdalene, as she sat weeping beside the tomb. He knew that as yet she couldn't make sense of what had happened. She was in pain and grief. And so he appeared to her and said her name. For her, that's all it took to realise that everything Jesus had always helped her to believe when he was alive was still possible.

It's easy to single out Thomas as the doubter, but let's look just a little more closely at the rest of the disciples. Did you notice where it was that Jesus found them on the night after his resurrection? In a locked room, in fear. It's easy to assume that Easter Sunday was the moment when Jesus's followers came to believe, but that is far from the case. By the evening of that first Easter, John and Peter had been at the tomb. John, apparently, believed. Both – and Mary as well – had doubtless told the rest of the disciples what they had seen and what they believed. But if we think that led to great shouts of alleluia and singing praises to the Lord, nothing could be further from the truth. Because we find the disciples – minus Thomas – holed up in a house, frightened.

Of course part of their fear will have been for what the authorities would make of the empty tomb. The past week had been tense, and the disappearance of Jesus's body was unlikely to make it any less so. But I wonder, is that all that they were afraid of? Part of their fear may well have been their own struggle to make sense of what was happening. But dare we also wonder whether they might have been a little bit scared of Jesus himself? After all, they didn't exactly cover themselves in glory during his final hours. If he really had risen, might he have something to say about their failings?

And again, this is where we have to look to Jesus to find the hope. Because Jesus knows that he has been betrayed and abandoned, and yet all he has to offer is love. He goes to the locked room; enters it; and offers the reassurance that the disciples need. More than that, though. If we want to understand real forgiveness, here it is. As though the betrayal and abandonment have been forgotten. The disciples may feel that they have let him down, but he still places his trust in them, commissioning them and sending them out filled with the Holy Spirit.

If we ever think that we're not good enough, the answer is always that we are. That with God's love we can be. And that love is always a relationship in which Jesus meets us where we are and invites us to enter into that relationship of love. He doesn't just meet us once, either. God's love isn't time limited – God has as long as it takes. God will keep on meeting us; will keep on loving us. And each of us will find our own way of saying, "my Lord and my God". Wherever that may lead us.

Amen