

Come with me, please, in your imaginations to Jerusalem in the early hours of the first Easter day. Most of the disciples are in lockdown in the upper room. Jesus has apparently utterly failed. All their hopes are dashed to pieces and they are now in fear of their lives. Only some of the women are out in the dark- -creeping to the tomb with their burial spices- -determined to do for the body of their beloved Jesus what they weren't allowed to do at the time of his death. They're grief stricken, trembling, not knowing how they're going to cope with the great boulder blocking the entrance to the tomb, but going there all the same. What a shock they get when they arrive. The boulder's been moved! The tomb's empty! What can it mean?

The astonishing news of the resurrection gradually dawns and reaches the disciples still in lockdown. Thomas hasn't been around for some reason and when his excited friends tell him they've seen the lord, not unreasonably, he fears it may be "fake news".

This Thomas is the same man who'd previously realised what Jesus' constant collisions with the religious authorities would lead to. When their friend Lazarus dies and Jesus decides to go to the grieving sisters in Bethany on the way to Jerusalem, Thomas bursts out with these astonishing words: *"Let us also go, that we may die with him"*. Thomas knows what's coming even then. He's filled with an intense desire to be totally loyal to Jesus, even if it means death. But when the crunch comes he runs away like all the rest.

Why wasn't he there in lockdown with the others when Jesus came to them? Was he so ashamed he couldn't face anyone? Had he bravely ventured out to get bread for everyone? Who knows? For whatever reason he misses Jesus when he comes and he can't believe what the others are telling him. What's more, he sets his will against believing: "Unless I touch the wounds for myself **I will** not believe it".

Imagine their frustration with him, and then imagine how Thomas feels when Jesus suddenly appears again, especially when he treats Thomas with such tender understanding. He might well have said, "How foolish you are Thomas! Why didn't you believe me when I told you all, more than twice, that I must die and rise again?" Or, "Why didn't you believe your friends when they said they'd seen me Thomas? They surely wouldn't tell you lies."

But there's nothing like that. Jesus simply shows that he understands. I imagine him with a gentle, slightly wry smile as he holds out his hands to this bluff, honest, stubborn friend of his whom he loves so much. He knows him so well. He just couldn't let himself make that leap of faith, could he? But Jesus is alive. He understands. Come and see for yourself Thomas. Look at my wounds. Touch them. It is true. It's not fake news. Dare to have faith.

And now, the penny drops, the light dawns and everything falls into place. Thomas doesn't need to examine Jesus' wounds to check it all out. He simply expresses his newfound faith in a great cry: "My Lord and my God!" What an amazing moment of revelation!

Thomas is the last of the group to realise that Jesus has been raised, but he's the first to grasp what that really means. It's all there in those five short words: My Lord and my God!" Not only my teacher- -my friend- -not only the Messiah- -the one promised by the prophets- -which others had already begun to put into words before Jesus died- -but: "My Lord and my God". It's not easy to appreciate just how momentous that was.

Many years ago now I had a conversation I shall never forget. I'm very glad I wrote it down afterwards so that I couldn't forget! I'd given my little grandson, Harry, now a fine young man of 22, several books of Bible stories which he'd enjoyed and one day, at the age of five, seemingly out of the blue, he suddenly asked: "Grandma, is God real or is he pretend?"

Good question!

Of course I answered, “He’s real Harry. He’s always here. We can’t see him but he’s real and he loves us.”

Good reassuring Grandmotherly stuff, but it wouldn’t do. Harry pondered for a moment, then he said, “But Grandma, usually the things I can **see** are real and the others are pretend”. Wow! I sent up a quick prayer and then said, “Well Harry, what’s going in and out when we breathe?” We breathed in and out together loudly and vigorously and agreed that the air was there alright although we couldn’t see it. So there are some things we can’t see that are real after all! That seemed to satisfy him, for the time being at least.

Is God real? Or is he pretend? Did the resurrection really happen? Or was it fantasy- -hallucination- - or however else many people would explain it away? It’s a stumbling block for millions, even for some Christians!

In today’s Gospel reading John is telling us, without a shadow of doubt, that it was, and is, a living reality. But he understands the difficulties human minds are going to have with it. That episode with Thomas is one of my favourite bits of the whole resurrection story. He’s often called “Doubting Thomas”, but that’s never seemed fair to me. I always think of him as “Honest Thomas, Thomas the realist, the one who wants to be sure that what sounds like good news is not actually fake news.

After Thomas’s profession of faith Jesus talks to them about others to come after, others who will recognise him without the benefit of seeing and touching his risen body:

“Blessed are they who have not seen, and yet have believed”

He means **us** and countless millions like us, those who have not seen and yet have believed.

If the disciples had tried to come up with a concocted story they would certainly have produced a more coherent one than the ragbag of bits and pieces that we find in the gospels! Their very immediacy and breathless incoherence gives them authenticity.

The transformation of this handful of terrified defeated folk into the people who 2000 years ago took on the seemingly impossible task of spreading the news of God’s transforming love across the globe sounds crazy. But against all the odds the transformation of hearts and minds willing to engage continues.

John states that he has written his own account of the Gospel story so that all those who come after them might believe and through Jesus come to know what it really means to live—not simply to have a life but to have life with a capital L, Life in all its fullness. That is to know that life has meaning and purpose. To know that we matter. Isn’t that what people need to know most of all? That whatever life in this fallen and broken world may throw at them, they are unique—and precious- -and infinitely loved?

You are reading this sermon today, in our time of lockdown, because of the experience of Thomas and his friends, and a few million others in between. It’s our story now and we all have a part to play, however small, in this incredible cosmic drama that still continues.

Of course we need to use our minds, sifting the evidence, studying, debating, reasoning. That’s very important but it’s only a part of knowing and understanding. Sometimes people take great leaps in faith as a result of some deep experience, often borne out of suffering, but many of us grow only gradually as we try to follow Jesus day by day. Some of us will find faith harder than others by our very nature, like Thomas, but remember, Jesus understands us as he understood Thomas. We can be honest before God as we too enter into the struggle for ourselves.

Right now, in the midst of this grim world-wide pandemic, because of the experiences of those first disciples and countless others over two thousand years, we can rest in the certain knowledge that suffering and death will never have the final word!

Fake news? No indeed. Good news! The best!

Carole Lewis