

Sermon for Low Sunday April 2021

John 20v19-end

We've just heard how the disciples, in self imposed lockdown on that first Easter Day, receive extraordinary news. A great boulder blocking the entrance to the tomb and the locked doors of the upper room have proved no barrier to the risen Jesus. But Thomas hasn't been around for some reason and when his excited friends tell him the great news that 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 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. Some of you may have heard me talk about it before, but 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 23, several books of Bible stories which he'd enjoyed and one day, at the age of five, seemingly out 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. He's still not convinced but he hasn't given up questioning.

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 certain 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 surely 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 give them authenticity.

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

John states that he's 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?

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.

I'd like to end with a little poem a friend sent me recently.

It's called "The Sceptic:by Richard Candlin

(see next page)

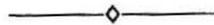
The Sceptic

The caterpillar asked his friend:
 "When we pupate, is that the end?
 I met some people who contend
 We have a life to come;
 They seem quite sure that you and I
 Will grow two pairs of wings and fly,
 And dance all day around the sky—
 It all sounds rather rum!"

His friend replied: "Two pairs of wings?
 I wonder where they hear such things!
 They tell you their imaginings
 Like those who really know.
 To fly! That would be quite a trick!
 Our bodies are too coarse and thick;
 For that, you must be very quick,
 And we are far too slow.

"It may be pleasant to recall,
 And tell the grubs while they are small,
 But it's a story far too tall
 For likes of you and me.
 Beware the webs that people weave,
 Whose far-fetched fantasies deceive;
 A caterpillar should believe
 What he can taste and see.

"So trouble not your little head
 With what will happen when you're dead,
 But spend your energies instead
 On things that we can chew;
 Our place it is to crawl and feed,
 To satisfy our natural greed,
 To fatten, and to pay no heed
 To what may not be true."



**We know that it is true!
 Alleluia, Alleluia, Christ is risen!
 He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia!**

Carole Lewis