



Sunday 7th April 2024

The Second Sunday of Easter

Gospel Reading

John 20.19-31

Jesus Appears to the Disciples

¹⁹ 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.' ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

Jesus and Thomas

²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ 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.'

²⁶ 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.' ²⁷ 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.' ²⁸ Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' ²⁹ 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.'

The Purpose of This Book

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹ 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.

Other Readings: Acts 4.32-35

Psalm 133

1 John 1.1 - 2.2

Homily

Here we are in John's story of Christ's saving death and resurrection, learning about what it is to recognise, then know and love, the risen Christ. And here we are in our churches across Lincolnshire, learning about what it is to recognise, then know and love, the risen Christ. Same challenge. Same privilege. Same Easter experience.

There is a handful of beliefs that are essential if you call yourself a Christian. That Jesus is the son of God, born into this world as both human and divine, and that he died a cruel death, and then was palpably, recognisably, gloriously alive as the beginning of a new creation in which we are invited, commanded maybe, to join. That the church is his body, empowered by the Holy Spirit to do the ongoing saving work in each generation. These are the basics of our faith – we may differ in our understanding of how they are given to us, and how belief in them affects what else we believe and how we live. But they are, as you might say, what it says on the tin if we are Christians. Great that all this is re-affirmed every year by collectively living through the Christmas and Easter services and narratives. Great that it is embodied in today's gospel.

Some of it is tough to believe, though – especially the varied explanation and story telling of the different books of the New Testament. Today's story is at the end of the penultimate book of John's Gospel. If Matthew ends, famously, with the command to propagate the gospel and the encouraging promise of the eternal companionship of the risen Christ, John's ends with the command to continue Christ's redeeming work, to establish the church (whether that is the community of the faithful or the institution which quickly grew up) as the agent of new life in baptism, sustaining contact with the Lord in the sacrament of the altar, the ministry of reconciliation or the setting out of a life in the new creation. Feed my sheep, Christ says in the next and final chapter.

Tough to believe – surely we all own that toughness? Thomas, late to the party in terms of the witness to the new life of and in Jesus, has to be convinced. How many folk have said to us, when we are called to defend our faith or to convince those exploring it, "how can I believe in what I have not personally seen?". Thomas's candour in expressing his uncertainty, is really helpful to us and to those we meet on their journeys of faith. But even more helpful is the Lord's response. The disciples might have taken a rougher line, as some of us do in our churches – look, if you don't get it you can't be one of us. But Jesus understands the cultural shift Thomas and so many others need to make from a proof-centred, matter-of-fact attitude to everything, to a love and experience centred relationship. You want to see my wounds – here they are. Touch my body and believe – just as we are invited to do in receiving Holy Communion.

Does Thomas instantly accept and understand the whole package of difficult beliefs and meaningful narratives that may be fact or metaphor? No, and nor, probably, do we. It is sometimes easier to say we do believe in the detail, but we should not be too troubled about nagging doubts. Some of the details of the story of the incarnation, the resurrection and the commissioning of the church are borderline magic to some folk, and to others part of a package of divine supernatural manipulation of the laws of nature which is explicit in scripture. Maybe it doesn't matter as long as we believe that somehow, and intentionally and for the benefit of all of us, God became human, Christ died and is definitely met in his risen-

ness, and continues to sustain us in continuing his saving endeavour. Being open to being transformed by the act of touching the re-born crucified Christ, by learning to respond to the love shown in the whole business of Easter, is what we are called to in these first days of Easter, and we have seen it in the experience of Thomas. He, like us, asks to be shown. Christ is not un-invited in the Thomas story. So many in our churches and outside are really open to meeting the risen Lord – to being shown and drawn into fellowship. They and we are asking Christ to open his hands and show us. Let us ask today that we might be shown the presence of the risen Christ amongst us, reaching out to each one of us.

Conversation Questions

1. What would you ask the Lord if your friends in the family of faith said that he was there and they believed in who he was and why he was there?
2. Why do you think doubt is such a negative word?
3. When Jesus says that whatever the church, or the company of the apostles at least, does for you on behalf of the Lord, it is done, do you feel that working for you?
4. Is there anything else from the passage not already discussed that speaks to you? What is it?
5. What will you do this week in your Monday-to-Saturday ministry in response to what you have heard today? #everydayfaith

Prayer

Spend some time in prayer, responding to what you have heard today and listening to what God might be saying to you.

Collect of the day

Almighty Father,
you have given your only Son to die for our sins
and to rise again for our justification:
grant us so to put away the leaven of malice and wickedness
that we may always serve you
in pureness of living and truth;
through the merits of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

(or)

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.

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