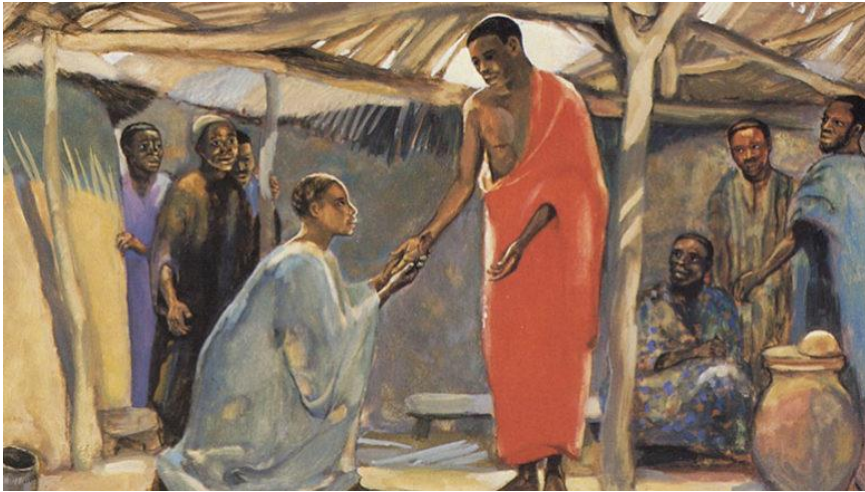


Sunday 19th April 2020



Acknowledgement of Country

As you enter this time of worship please acknowledge the custodianship of this land by the Kamilaroi peoples - the traditional owners of this land and pay respect to their elders – past, present and emerging.

Call to Worship

Come! Bring your doubts, your hopes, your faith.

Christ is risen! Alleluia!

*Come! Bring your questions, your wonderings,
your misgivings.*

Christ is risen! Alleluia!

Come! Bring your fear, your sorrow, your joy.

Christ is risen! Alleluia!

Come, bring your joy, your praise, yourself.

Christ is risen! Alleluia!

Let us worship God.

Christ is risen! Alleluia!

Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Song *Alleluia, alleluia*

*Alleluia, alleluia, give thanks to the risen Lord,
alleluia, alleluia, give praise to his name.*

Jesus is Lord of all the earth;
he is the king of creation. *Refrain.*

Spread the good news o'er all the earth:
Jesus has died and has risen. *Refrain.*

We have been crucified with Christ;
now we shall live for ever. *Refrain.*

God has proclaimed his gracious gift:
new life for all! Alleluia! *Refrain.*

Come, let us praise the living God,
joyfully sing to our Saviour. *Refrain.*

TiS 390 Donald E Fishel. Copied under CCLI Worship Licence No. 604439

Prayers of Confession

For our prayers of confession this week I invite you to take time to reflect on each sentence and how it might apply to you.

In a world of fear, of doubt, of being enforced to live behind closed doors,
O God forgive me for those times when I shut myself away from the hopefulness of the Easter message.

Silence

In a world where people are lonely, sick, despairing,
O God forgive me for those times when all I care about is my wellbeing and shut my eyes, my ears and my heart to the needs of those around me.

Silence

In a world where the whole of creation is crying out for re-generation and the thoughtfulness of those who live within it,
O God forgive me when I fail to take steps to do what I can to ensure a healthy planet.

Silence

Come to us, God.
Open our locked doors and hearts, enter in and dust us off
Renew and recreate us through the gift of your risen son, Jesus Christ, we pray.
Amen.

The Gospel *John 21:19-31*

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."

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."

Message

Thomas, if he were alive today, would have every reason to feel peeved at the way the church has remembered him. On the basis of this one story he has always been known as “Doubting Thomas”. This is a bit of a problem, not only for Thomas, but also for us, because it makes it quite hard for us to hear anything else in the story. We spot the story and think, “O yes, the story of Doubting Thomas,” and that’s all we hear.

The fact is that Thomas is not shown to be any more of a doubter than most of the rest of the disciples.

We might ask ourselves how Thomas’ doubt compared to that of his mates.

Thomas was absent when Jesus turned up and showed the other disciples his hands and his feet and when Thomas came back and was told by them that they’d seen Jesus he was, understandably incredulous. He’d seen Jesus dead. Very dead. Hung up to die and then stabbed with a spear just to make sure. So, Thomas was not going to be conned. “I’ll need to see the nail marks and the hole where the spear went in before I’d be able to believe that story,” he said – and fair enough too. After all, isn’t that exactly the same reaction that the rest of the twelve had had when the women reported their experience at the empty tomb.

In Luke’s account of the resurrection - when the women told the disciples that the angels had told them that Christ had risen it says, they didn’t believe them and thought it was ridiculous. Even if we stick with just John’s account, the disciples who are huddled fearfully behind closed doors had already heard from Mary Magdalene that she had met the risen Christ in the garden, but they remain behind their locked doors.

So to single Thomas out as the doubting one looks to be seriously unfair. It would be fairer to say that he was one of the doubting eleven, no worse than the rest of them.

Perhaps the real reason why Thomas was singled out is simply that he was the only one who hadn’t been there the first time Jesus visited, and so in his story we see the individual version of what all the others went through collectively. In a sense I think we could say that Thomas’ story is every disciple’s story, and that Thomas’ story is your story and my story.

There are some interesting things to note about this story:

It’s interesting that so many interpretations of this story look at Thomas’ doubts in a negative way. It’s interesting because in the language of Koine Greek – in which the New Testament is written – there is no such word as ‘doubt’. It’s interesting because by saying Thomas ‘doubted’ we’re implying that there was something wrong with him. That he had less than the required amount of faith.

Paul Tillich a German American theologian claimed in his book ‘Dynamics of Faith’ that authentic faith included doubt as well as affirmation. He said that questions and doubts were not a sign of faithlessness, but a willingness to take faith seriously. Tillich is not the only theologian to say this – there have been many others.

I don’t know about you, but I find Christians who have no doubts and questions fairly hard to get along with. It’s as if they have their faith all sewn up – every ‘I’ dotted and every ‘T’ crossed. But for me, faith is not like that. For me, faith is a growing process and I have learnt by asking questions. Amongst other things, I have learnt by sometimes wondering whether God is just a great big myth and placing this question alongside my experiences. I have learnt by pondering on the juxtaposition of all the suffering that goes on in the world and a God who is supposed to be a God of love. I have learnt by thinking about the reality of life as I know it, and how God fits in to that reality. The experiences I have had in my journey through life have, at many times, led me to question and to doubt – just as Thomas did, and I would have to say that on the whole, my doubts and questioning have not lessened my faith, but rather strengthened it, even though I am finding that as I get older I have more and more questions and there are more and more shades of grey.

I want to share very briefly some insights that I came across when doing some reading for this week.

Firstly, this story is placed within a particular Christian community – a community which lived round about 90 - 100 AD. It was a community which was experiencing debates on mission strategy, leadership issues, and discipleship – in fact, a community which was in many respects, similar to ours. It was a community that was being forced to work out who they were, who Jesus was for them and who were trying to work out what sort of God they believed in. It is within this context that we hear the story of Thomas.

Secondly, the writer of John's Gospel, seems to be making it fairly clear that the faith which marks a true disciple relies on accepting the witness of others rather than a personal experience of the Christ. Thomas was not prepared to believe what the other disciples told him about Christ. He had to see for himself and thus he missed out. And Jesus' words 'blessed are those who believe without seeing' must have echoed in his ears. You know, I sometimes think that we often fail to recognise Jesus in the experiences of other people. So often we fail to see his presence in experiences which might be 'foreign' to us – and because we are not open to the unexpected presence of Jesus we miss out - and our lives are the poorer for it. And, operating in the reverse direction: I believe that it is as we practice hospitality, belonging, respect and humility; as we practice conversation and disagreement in helpful ways, that we are opening others to the presence of Christ and to a faith experience. If we, as a community of faith, make our community of faith a safe place for people to ask questions; for people to have some doubts, then our faith will be open to being shaped and reshaped.

And thirdly, this story emphasises what some claim is the underlying theme running throughout the whole of John's collection of stories: that is, we experience the creative, transforming power of God routinely, quietly moving through life. It's often subtle, often unpredictable, and often hard to grasp. As one writer puts it: "It is less like a hammer on the head than it is a gentle prod - a tickle, sometimes as gentle as a feather, touching each moment into being" We all experience Christ's resurrection, "by simply being alive, and going through all the normal, routine transformations of human growth and love and death"

The good news of Easter, then, is not that it is the final scene in a story.

Rather, Easter is the beginning of an open-ended future. At this moment in the history of our world where many of us are locked away behind closed doors – fearful and doubting when and if things will ever return to normal, whatever normal might be, may we experience the beginning of an open-ended future. A future where God says to us: Look forward to the small transformations that will occur in your life. See them as being the work of my Spirit lifting you up and calling you on to a way of hope and renewal.

Song *These things did Thomas count as real*

These things did Thomas count as real: the warmth of blood, the chill of steel,
the grain of wood, the heft of stone, the last frail twitch of flesh and bone.

The vision of his sceptic mind was keen enough to make him blind
to any unexpected act too large for his small world of fact.

His reasoned certainties denied that one could live when one had died,
until his fingers read like braille the markings of the spear and nail.

May we, O God, by grace believe and thus the risen Christ receive,
whose raw imprinted palms reached out and beckoned Thomas from his doubt.

Tune: TiS 357 Thomas Troeger, Borrowed Light, OUP, 1994. Used with permission.

Prayers of the People

(Prepared by Peter Battle)

Gracious and loving God, you have taught your people to pray to you in times of sorrow and in times of joy, in times of doubt and in times of assurance, and so we bring to you our prayers for all your people and we humbly ask you to hear us as we call upon you:

Compassionate and liberating Christ, whose life colours all things with hope, shine among us today, we pray. We thank you for the ways that you encounter us – giving us hope and comfort and strength, when we are at our most vulnerable.

We pray for your world, strangely united in the grip of this pandemic. We pray for the leaders of all nations, including our Prime Minister and other members of parliament and government positions, as they seek to find the best answers to this situation. Be with ‘front line’ people in whatever job they hold. May they have the facilities they require and may they feel safe in the work they undertake. May we realize your victorious love is over all, binding us together even in our isolation, stirring us to reach out in prayer and concern for others.

Lord, we pray for all in need of your comfort, reassurance and hope at this time, for all who suffer anguish, loneliness or despair. As you came in peace to your frightened and bewildered disciples at that first Easter, come today to all who feel abandoned and afraid.

Risen Jesus, we pray for all who are burdened with feelings of doubt, who search for you in the face of worldwide suffering, who look for meaning in life emptied of social contact. As you made yourself known to the women who sought you at the tomb, make yourself known today to those who doubt and yearn, that in you they find the certainty they seek.

Lord, we pray for our community, for those with whom we have associated in work and play, for our families and our friends, those from whom now we are separated in person.

As you opened the doors that enclosed them, and joined all your disciples together with the promise of your Holy Spirit, join us with blessing of your presence.

We pray for your church, changed in form at the moment yet united in spirit, that you will bless and guide all who seek to minister to your people in new ways. As you opened the Scriptures to your disciples on the Emmaus road, make yourself known today afresh to those who seek you.

Lord, as you did on the evening of the first day of Easter, walk through the closed doors of our doubts and fears, hold us tight until the warmth of your grace softens our hardened hearts, give to us the gift of your peace that calms our frightened faith, open our eyes to the brightness of life lived in your resurrection power.

Risen God, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Amen.

The Lord’s Prayer

Here are your disciples

Lord Jesus,
here are your disciples –
your wounded hands and feet in the world today are ours.

*At times we have been the frightened ones,
staying at a distance,
worried about our safety or our reputation,
But you come close to us,
bringing peace and challenge,
unlocking our potential
and setting us free.*

At times we have been the doubting ones,
when creeds conflict or certainty has evaded us.

But you come close
and allow us to speak our minds,
accepting us and setting us free.

*At times we have been the confused ones,
feeling far from you
with questions that don't have answers.
So, we listen for your resurrected voice.*

(Silence)

The risen Christ says to us:
'Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.'
Through our fear,
through our doubt,
through our confusion,
may we continue Jesus' work as we travel many roads,
liberated and united by the love of the resurrected one. Amen.

From *Stages on the Way* Wildgoose Worship Group

Hymn *Faith will not grow from words alone*

Faith will not grow from words alone, from proofs provided, scripture known;
our faith must feel its way about, and live with question-marks and doubt.

The pattern Jesus showed, we share: life comes through death, hope through despair.
God is made known in brokenness, and faith feeds on God's emptiness.

The church still tells how Jesus came through death to glorious life again –
the strangest story! Yet, maybe, our faith will thrive on mystery.

Faith takes the little that we know, and calls for hope, and tells us: Go!
Love and take courage, come what may; Christ will be with us on the way.

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Benediction

May the wonder of Easter break forth anew in you,
in those you love and in all the earth.
And the blessing of God: life-giver,
tomb-breaker and agent of transformation,
be with you this day and in the days to come. Amen.