

19 April 2020 the 2nd Sunday of Easter
Sermon by the Rev James W. Aitchison
Based on John 20:19-31

Jesus Appears to His Disciples

¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

²¹ Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." ²² And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Jesus Appears to Thomas

²⁴ Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

²⁸ Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

²⁹ Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

The Purpose of John's Gospel

³⁰ Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

In the above passage from John's Gospel we read of Jesus appearing to His Disciples on the evening of His resurrection. There were ten disciples in the upper room, only ten because Judas had committed suicide and Thomas was absent, why we do not know.

Ten Disciples are hiding away in an upper room with the doors locked, why? Because they were afraid that those who killed Jesus would now come after His Disciples: and who can blame them?

What sense were they to make of all that had happened in the last three days? Jesus, the one they had seen calm the storm, feed the five thousand and raise a friend from the dead, had been taken by force and crucified. They had seen him die on the cross and his cold lifeless body put into a tomb.

The Disciples will have had heard that some of the women had that morning been to the tomb and that an Angel had told them that Jesus had risen from the dead; they will have heard that Peter and John had gone to the tomb and that they did not see the body of Jesus. Now they gather to consider what they have heard: "is it true?" "Where is Jesus?" "What will we do?"

It would seem that the Disciples did not understand or believe that Jesus had risen from the dead, for if they did would they be hiding away in fear? We are told that they are in a locked room, when 'Jesus came and stood among them.'" The Scriptures do not say that Jesus knocked or called out and that someone unlocked the door and let Him in, but simply that He 'came and stood among them.'" This must have startled them, which is why He calmed them with the words, "Peace be with you."

Christ now had a resurrection body, it was no longer bound by the laws of physics, still a real body, and recognizable as Jesus, including the scars of His execution, but somehow no longer subject to the normal pattern of things.

It is a comforting thought that Jesus knew where they were, even though they were hiding, and that He came and stood among them. They were frightened, and if they were being hunted, then Jesus would share that danger with them.

Jesus showed them the scars on his hands and side, and at this the disciples were filled with joy: this was proof enough to them that Jesus had risen from the dead. No one survived a Roman crucifixion, all the others who bore such scars, would be rotting in a tomb, not standing in a room.

No wonder the Disciples are elated, they have their Lord and friend back and He has proven He has power over death. Now they are ready to receive their Mission, they are to take the Good News of Jesus rising from the dead, the Gospel, to others.

For some unknown reason, Thomas was not with the other ten when Jesus appeared, and so when they told him that they had seen the Lord, he did not believe them. (Would you?) He said, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

A week later all of the Disciples, including Thomas, are in the house again, and like before the doors are locked, but 'Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Jesus knew that Thomas had doubted what he had heard concerning Jesus rising from the dead, and so before any of the Disciples could say anything, Jesus says to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

Thomas said to Him, "My lord and my God!"

“Stop doubting and believe” Oh how important these words are for us all.

Surely there are times when we find it difficult to believe that Jesus is Lord of all, that He can make all things right and that He will indeed make all things right in His good time.

The other disciples were shown Jesus’s wounds and they believed, but even they needed something to help them believe, Thomas required just that wee bit more, he wanted to touch those wounds to check if they were real. Once he had touched the wounds on Jesus’s hands and side Thomas goes from ardent unbelief to expressing the highest level of faith recorded in the Gospel of John, when he says to Jesus, “My Lord and my God!” Now, Thomas understands who Jesus really is.

Thomas believed because he saw Jesus and had touched the wounds on His body, but Jesus told the Disciples that those who had not seen were blessed. This must mean, that those who do not have the physical evidence of Jesus and yet believe in Him will be blessed in a way that Thomas and the other disciples are not.

This means that such a blessing is for you and all believers through the ages, because faith for you and them rests not on the senses or mere reason, but on the witness of the Holy Spirit of God, through God’s Holy Word and through the preaching of it. It is such faith that has sustained the Church and it is this faith that sustains us.

Faith does not require proofs, but once believed, the proofs are abundant and we are left asking ourselves, “How could I have been so blind?”

Some of the most faithful servants of God were once the most ardent unbelievers, some repudiating even the possibility of God.

Consider the Apostle Paul, and how he railed against Christ, consider John Newton the slave trader, who thought there was no God to reckon with.

During this current pandemic it may be difficult for many of us to believe that God has all things under control: if He has, why is He allowing this virus to cause so much pain and misery? If He is all-powerful surely He could stop it at any time? If He truly loved us He would not want to see us suffer.

Well my friends, as you will already suspect, I cannot give you an answer as to why God allows suffering, all I can tell you is what we read in the Holy Scriptures, that is, that God seems to allow suffering for His greater purpose for us and all creation, a purpose beyond our understanding. Though He allows suffering, He has in Christ suffered too; every pang of pain felt either in your body, or your soul, is understood by our Saviour.

Thomas believed when he saw and touched the wounds on Jesus's hands and side. Jesus had suffered and died and rose again, but it was the proof of His suffering that convinced Thomas that Jesus was who He said He was.

When he put his hand into the wound on Jesus's side, Thomas knew then, that Jesus was the Lord God and that He was, (and still is) the Saviour who knows suffering.

Thomas and the other disciples did not know what would happen after this experience with Jesus. Could they have known that they would be responsible for spreading the Gospel to the furthest reaches of the earth? Could they have known the hardships they would face in doing so? Any worries or doubts they might have had, faded into the background as they took encouragement and joy in the presence of Jesus.

Let us do all we can to keep in the presence of Jesus, and we like the three Disciples will find encouragement and joy, and our worries and doubts will gradually fade into the background.

As for Thomas there is some evidence to suggest that he took the Gospel to India and possibly even reached China. Wow!

God bless you.

