

Easter 2: John 20.19-end, 07.04.24 ORNC

It's been one week since Easter, the chaos and excitement, of the discovery of the empty tomb. Together with the disbelief, the guilt of the disciples who abandoned Jesus at his most vulnerable; think of what it would have been like for those disciples, gathered together in the upper room, on that first Easter evening, which is where, today's gospel begins. Think of what they witnessed in the days leading up to Easter, the emotional Thursday evening, when Jesus washed the disciples' feet, and shared a last supper with them. There was his agony in the garden, when the disciples fell asleep, as Jesus prayed, followed by the betrayal by one of their own, Judas, followed by Jesus' arrest. The denial by Peter, the crowds shouting for Jesus to be crucified. Then the trial of Jesus, his torture and crucifixion, followed by his burial in the tomb.

In the gospel this morning, we read the disciples are still in hiding, entrenched where they were following the events of Good Friday. But if the resurrection was and is such a life changing event, why are they still huddled together in the same place? What difference has the empty tomb made to them? Or perhaps, they've simply haven't heard the Good News, that Christ has risen? It doesn't look as if it's made much difference to the disciples – but all is that about to change. The biggest transformation here, is that Jesus who the disciples' thought had died, is now standing before them; and once Jesus spoke "peace be with you", the disciples rejoiced and believed. Jesus promised them that he would return, and be with them, for a little while longer: A promise which he kept. Upon reading this part of the gospel, the disciples seem to be unaware of what has happened. Trauma and disbelief from the events of Good Friday, had made time stand still for them and haven't realised that Jesus has risen, and what that now means for them all. But now, new beginnings and what life truly means for the disciples, awaits them.

Any major upsets in life can knock us sideways, and for the disciples and for us today; life after the resurrection is very different, though perhaps "a work still in progress?" Now it's a new way of being, and a life to be lived in all its fullness.

By the grace of God, the disciples and for us today, are to evolve into the resurrected people. By our relationships and the circumstances of not only our lives, but our stories woven in the life, death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the son of God. Every day we are stepping into the resurrected life. Sometimes it's not always easy, and some days are difficult, but often, there are glimmers of hope. So often, in Christian life, the need of proof and evidence, often rubs against our steadfast beliefs and spiritual convictions. This is especially so, when the word and works of God, are challenged by those yet to believe, or by those whose faith has been dented. The gospel this morning, marks a significant moment not in just Jesus' life, but in the lives of the disciples, and the lives of the first believers. The recent events have woven eyewitness accounts and stories of Jesus' death, and of the empty tomb. To those disciples locked inside the upper room, locked in grief and in fear of what may happen to them, at the hands of the authorities. Get the fright of their lives, when Jesus stands amongst them. Jesus had come to find them, and reassure them. But no sooner after they're rejoicing, Jesus doesn't waste time, as the Holy Spirit falls upon them, and instructs them on forgiving and retaining sins in his name, enabling them more fully, as his disciples. They are to carry on the ministry of Jesus, and the disciples waste no time, to tell the other disciple, Thomas (who wasn't with them in the room), and that they have seen Jesus with their very own eyes. But for Thomas, though hearing his brothers telling him, that Jesus stood amongst them, but he needed to see Jesus for himself, and see the wounds of the crucifixion too, to believe, that Jesus had indeed conquered death.

When we hear or read about Thomas, he is often known as "doubting Thomas". But the fact of the matter is, for him, this is the starting point of his life as a disciple of the risen Christ. Who represents those, who have not yet seen, and come to believe, in the events of the first Good Friday and Easter. Remarkably, Thomas, went on as the Apostle to the people of India, who brought the gospel of Christ to that part of the world, and died a martyr. That doesn't sound much like a doubter, but someone who grew and changed, and for whom the resurrection of Christ was very real, and for whom the empty tomb, made such a difference. It simply took a little more time, and a little more convincing. We have come to know "doubting Thomas" who hesitated that Christ had risen, but let's not forget the "confessing Thomas", as he exclaims "my Lord and my God", upon seeing Jesus.

Thomas had recognised the living God in Jesus, and somewhere between “doubting Thomas” and “confessing Thomas” is the story of the resurrection in his life, and the starting place of his renewed faith and belief, and ministry.

The gospel asks us, what is our starting place of the story of our witness to the resurrection? Where do we find ourselves in life today, or the circumstances which we find ourselves in? If we find ourselves dealing with uncertainty, loneliness, or sorrow or disappointment, that’s the room which Christ enters. If we’re locked in a house of fear or confusion, or darkness or illness, that’s the place in which Jesus stands with us, and the peace which he offers to us. If joy, gratitude, and celebration is the centre of our lives, that is the starting place for sharing our Easter joy. The disciples who were still behind the locked doors, stood on the threshold of new beginnings of their discipleships. The opportunity of overcoming doubt and disbelief, and for the disciple Thomas to see for himself; that Jesus was truly alive, would never have happened. The beginning of a new life and ministry in Christ, was not only for Thomas and the other disciples, but also for the many disciples who came after. That would not have happened, neither the birth of the early Christian Church, which would never have seen the light of day.

This gospel throws up so many questions for us today. With just a week gone in this Eastertide, we need to ask ourselves “what are the doors that are locked in our lives; and what are the things which have kept us in the same place?” As Jesus’ disciples today, we too must not hide away after the events of the resurrection, and be fearful to what may lie ahead. We need to rejoice in the risen Christ, and move forward with courage and strength, to build up the kingdom of God around us, and embrace what God has given us, through his beloved and only son. The gospel gives us an insight in the days after the resurrection, where the disciples came to faith through an encounter with the risen Christ. What Jesus did on that first Easter evening was to show the frightened disciples, the same grace and mercy, and forgiveness and love, that he always showed. He came and stood among them and simply said, “*Peace be with you.*” Then, to ease their doubts, he showed them his hands and his side. No wonder the disciples rejoiced when they saw him! Not only was Jesus alive and stood among them, he had also forgiven them for all that they had done, and not done, in the days leading to his crucifixion.

The locked doors of bewilderment, soon opened to compassion so that the Holy Spirit was bestowed upon them, to begin their mission of spreading the Good News.

Jesus appeared to many in the aftermath of the resurrection, and many more came to believe, upon hearing the testaments of those who witness the resurrected Christ. This Eastertide, we need to reflect on what the resurrection means for each of us, and together as the people of God. We need to engage in the world around us, where we *can* make a difference. In those moments of doubts and fears, our crucified and risen Lord and Saviour, still comes to us and says “*peace be with you.*” Again and again, he comes to us and says “*do not doubt, but believe.*” It is Jesus who forgives us, and breathes new life into us, and promises us the gift of the Holy Spirit to enable us. Again and again, our risen Lord reminds us of *our* mission, to go and share the peace, the joy and the hope of this new life in Him. In a world which often struggles to find real peace, hope and joy; it is the risen Christ who can give us all these things, and gently remind us, not to doubt, but to believe in order to build up the kingdom of God, here on earth. **Amen. Alleluia!**

