

April 19th 2020 Sermon – Rev Tony Rindl, Vicar of St Mary’s Church Watford

A reading from St John’s Gospel, Chapter 20 beginning at verse 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!” After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.” Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. 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.” 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!” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your fingers 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!” Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” Jesus performed many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. 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.

May I speak to you in the name of the living God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

We are all familiar with the phrase ‘seeing is believing’, and I suspect its origins come from this story of doubting Thomas we have just heard from our reading from St John’s Gospel. I want to reflect today on how doubt is not a sign of weakness but actually a gift which supports our faith. I think ‘seeing is believing’ is not just about having undeniable evidence and underlying proof that an event has happened or a theory is true. I think ‘seeing is believing’ is also about understanding what it all means. So I think when Thomas says “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” isn’t just looking for the evidence to prove that Jesus is alive and the resurrection has happened, he is also searching for answers. What does this incredible event mean? He is not only looking for the evidence he is looking for understanding and wanting to make sense of it all. This is what I mean when I say that doubt is not necessarily a weakness or indeed the opposite of faith. It is perfectly reasonable to ask questions, to look for evidence, to seek, to understand exactly what God has done and is doing. And for us to ask what does it mean when we say Jesus is alive and he has risen from the grave.

I love John’s account of the resurrection and I love the fact that he includes the story of Thomas in that account. But truth be told Thomas is not the only one here with doubt. Are we not told that when Jesus first appeared to the disciples they are together in a room with the door locked in fear of the Jewish leaders. Presumably

they feared that as followers of Jesus they too may be arrested and put on trial and sentenced to death. They are fearful even though by this time Mary Magdelene has visited the tomb and has discovered that the stone that has blocked the entrance has rolled away, and on telling the disciples that this has happened, Peter and John had rushed to the tomb and had seen for themselves that the tomb was empty. Not only that, there was evidence that something amazing had happened, that this simply wasn't a case of body snatching because where Jesus had been laid were the grave clothes neatly folded, which was rather odd to say the least. And one might ask 'what are they doing there?' 'who has done this?' 'what does it mean?' 'Seeing is believing' and it is not just about seeing the evidence, it's about understanding what that evidence means.

John writes "Then Simon Peter came along behind him, and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. Then in brackets it says (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)"

And so then the disciples went back to where they were staying. But the story goes on and of course we read about Mary returning to the grave, encountering Jesus who then calls out her name. And Mary in her joy must have reached out to Jesus, but as we read, Jesus said to her "Do not hold onto me for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

I love the way that St John describes those first events and he begins his account by stating "Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark Mary Magdelene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance." I love that image he paints of it being early morning and it still being dark, and how things must have looked in that dim, milky light before sunrise. Actually this Easter I got up early and I did a livestream from my back garden, but I didn't use a carefully crafted script, but instead used the freedom of my imagination to reflect on what it must have been like for Mary having two days earlier witnessed those traumatic events of Good Friday; the betrayal, the arrest, the trial, the torture, the cruel death. The despair, horror, trauma. I could imagine that in the early morning half light it was a confused, deeply upset Mary who discovered the stone had been rolled away. And as the day progresses there had been these developments. But there is still no certainty, no complete picture, no understanding of what has happened. It is still very hazy. And that is the context of our reading today. And when Jesus does appear to the disciples the door to the room is locked because they are still fearful. Their faith and belief was not strong, and there was doubt.

Thomas was not with them. We don't know why he wasn't there and only turns up later. He is known as doubting Thomas, not because that is what Jesus called him, or the Gospel writer calls him. But he has acquired the name through Christian tradition throughout the ages. And I think it is because the church recognises that Thomas' doubt helps others to come to faith. I like Thomas and I can readily identify

with him. There we are the most incredible day in human history, the day of resurrection and he is missing. And so he needs to see the evidence for himself. He can't just take the disciples' word for it, and so he says "unless I see the nail marks in his hands, and put my finger where the nails were, put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

We know what happens a week later. Jesus appears to his disciples and this time Thomas is present. Jesus appears to the disciples and indeed invites Thomas to place his finger where the nails were and to put his hand into Jesus' side. And it's enough for Thomas to be the first disciple to say "My Lord and my God". Not only did Thomas believe, he understood. He understood what God had done, he understood that the kingdom of God was a reality here on earth. The old order of sin and death and separation from God has been overcome. This reality, this new reality is the start of something new, something special, a new creation no less.

And today as Christians we would believe that this is the new Kingdom of God, here and now, and yet still to come. And in the Lord's Prayer, we say don't we, "thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven."

St Thomas is known as doubting Thomas, although in the Gospel he is known as Didymus which means twin. In many ways faith and doubt are like twins, they both draw us closer to God and they work hand in hand. Indeed I would go as far as to say faith without doubt is a dangerous thing. We only have to think about religious fanatics to know what harm fundamentalism can do.

Certainly faith can be a strength in difficult times, but in an event like coronavirus which comes along every now and again, there are some things that knock our faith for six. And it's in times like this that we need to see doubt as a friend not an enemy. In our Gospel reading we are told the disciples are locked in the room through fear, and today we find ourselves locked in our homes because of fear. And rightly so, it is the most sensible course of action we can take at this critical time. Many of us are using this time to spend more time with God in prayer and Bible reading, and that is commendable, it helps us in our faith and belief and trust in God. But we need to also acknowledge our doubts and have the permission to ask such questions. In our reading we are told a week later, a week after Easter Sunday, the disciples are again together and the door is still locked even though the week before they had encountered the risen Jesus. In the midst of fear and doubt, even before Thomas gets the proof he is looking for, the risen Jesus appears to his disciples and he says to them, "Peace be with you!" Friends in this time of lockdown can I encourage you to use your time wisely in prayer and private study of the Bible but also to bring your honest doubts and questions before God. And I pray that God's Holy Spirit will speak into your hearts, so that you too in the confines of your own home may hear the voice of Jesus say to you "Peace be with you!". Amen.