

**Gospel reading**

**John 20: 19-31**

*Tim and Lynne Collett*

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 Temple authorities, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

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

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.'

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.'

Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!'

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.'...

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

## Message

There were rumours that some of the women had seen him – but then, they all knew how *emotional* women could be... They'd seen that the tomb was empty; but who *knew* what had really happened? Had the body been stolen? Or had Jesus risen – and 'gone'? Either way, the Temple authorities and the Romans were still out to crush the remnants of his short-lived revolution – and who knew who might be arrested next, or stoned, or crucified?

And so here they are, Jesus' disciples, whose hopes and dreams of a new world have crashed and died with him – who as followers of the Way are particularly vulnerable amid this heady contagion of politics, religion and violence... Here they are... hiding huddled in a room, the doors barred to the world, the four walls closing in, as day follows day, and who knows when it will be safe to go outside again...?

Now, if this were an ordinary Easter, we might not sympathise too much with these men, who ran away on the night of Jesus' arrest, and disowned him in public, and abandoned him to a lonely death... But this year?... This year, we can perhaps imagine their situation all too vividly...

*[Video of congregation members at home.*

*Julie: It's so frustrating! One minute you're flat out working for the kingdom of God – and the next, you can't even leave the house!*

*Stacey: Even if you love your housemates, they can drive you a little crazy when you're stuck with each other all the time!*

*Nikki: It seems only yesterday it was crowds everywhere – now, we're in hiding from each other.*

*Robyn: It's horrible, knowing it's risky to go outside your own door.*

*Allan: So many rumours flying around, and you never know if you're getting the real story or not..*

*John: Worrying about family on the outside.*

*David: Relying on friends to deliver food and essentials.*

*Deb: Putting your life on hold...]*

And into this house in lock-down – into this place of uncertainty and fear, helplessness and discouragement and doubt – into this room – through the walls, through the barred doors – comes Jesus. Suddenly, he is standing in their midst... Through their best attempt at barricading themselves behind secure walls and doors – locking the world out, locking them in – comes Jesus. Finding them where they are. In their isolation. In their uncertainty and fear, their helplessness and discouragement and doubt...

Jesus has been raised from the dead! He could well have risen and gone; straight to glory; straight out into the world; pure Spirit; pure Life force... But no: he comes *here*. Comes to be with his friends. Comes to be known, to be seen, to be touched – to bring peace and courage, hope and purpose...

Into the place of uncertainty, Jesus brings peace. 'Shalom,' he says, once, and again, and again – his voice echoing through the ages, 'Peace be with you.'

Into the place of fear and helplessness, Jesus brings courage. 'He breathed on them, and said: Receive the Holy Spirit.' There's a wonderful moment in C S Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* when the Christ figure, the Lion Aslan, breathes on the Pevensie children before a great battle. 'I do feel a little braver now,' says Lucy.... In 50 days' time, at Pentecost, we will see these same fragile disciples filled with the Spirit, telling their wild, wondrous story of the risen Christ in the teeth of hostile authorities, before crowds of thousands. Because Christ had breathed on them, and they felt a little braver now...

Into the place of discouragement, Jesus brings new heart and purpose, trusting these fallible followers with nothing less than his own continuing work of mending the world. 'As the Father sent me,' he says, 'I send you'.

And into the place of doubt, Jesus brings re-assurance. He understands their uncertainty; shows them his scars; gives them permission to question – and reasons to believe. Their doubts don't keep him away – their wondering what the wild, wondrous story of resurrection could possibly mean in the real world of science and struggle, conflict and contagion – he still comes, still meets them where they are, questions and all...

The Bible doesn't call him 'Doubting Thomas': he's simply called Thomas Didymus, the Twin. And in fact, there's nothing in the Gospels to suggest that he was particularly prone to unbelief. With the other disciples, he'd seen Lazarus raised, lepers hugged and healed, multitudes fed with a little boy's lunch. In demanding to see Jesus' hands and feet, he's not asking anything that Jesus has not already *offered* the others, to show that it is indeed he – and real – and alive... It's just that he wasn't *there* that first time. He hadn't experienced the proof – the presence – as they had...

So when Thomas says: 'unless I see the nail marks, I will not believe' – perhaps it's not what we tend to assume: a sceptical refusal to believe the impossible. Perhaps it is, rather, a kind of integrity: wanting to encounter Jesus and decide for himself, rather than riding the faith of others. Or perhaps, it is a courageous insistence on facing an unbearable reality: a refusal to kid oneself that everything is fine, in order to 'feel better'... Perhaps it's not that Thomas's heart is hardened against belief – as we tend to assume – but that it's too tender to hope. Jesus alive after all? No: the grief is too raw, it would be too painful to get his hopes up – only to have them dashed again...

I wonder if we feel like that, sometimes: afraid to hope, afraid to trust, because the 'real' world just doesn't *work* like that. People, plans, businesses, communities, churches – they just don't come *alive* again once they're dead and gone. They just *don't*. 'Hope' is surely another word for 'wishful thinking'...

But then, suddenly, Jesus is *there* – for Thomas too. Even for Thomas. *Especially* for Thomas. And perhaps now Jesus' words: 'Stop doubting – and believe' – may sound less like a rebuke, and more like words of *love*. 'Thomas. See, touch. It's really me. The good news is true. More can be mended than you could ever imagine.... So don't be afraid: it's safe to believe. It's safe to believe it *all*.' It's safe to believe it all – because we really do have a God who brings Life from death, hope from despair, restoration from ruin...

And it is 'Doubting Thomas' who becomes the first person in recorded history to articulate the Christian faith that Jesus is both Lord and *God*; Doubting Thomas who, according to tradition, made it all the way to *India* with the Gospel. I've met several people from the Mar Thoma Church of India here in Australia: Mar Thoma – 'Saint Thomas'. That's what renewed hope can do...

We may not see the resurrected Christ in the flesh. We may not see the fear and brokenness of the world healed before our eyes. We may not see our hopes for the church miraculously fulfilled when the doors re-open. But Jesus comes. Jesus comes to us in the locked and darkened rooms of our uncertainty and fear, our helplessness and discouragement and doubt. Jesus comes to us, with the word of 'shalom'; with the breath of his Spirit; with calling and sending, and the promise of a world re-born...

So, friends, as you face struggle and uncertainty in this difficult time: don't be afraid to doubt – never be afraid to doubt – but also: *don't be afraid to believe*.

Don't be afraid to hold on in the faith and hope that Christ is risen and his Spirit is loose and working in the world. Don't be afraid to find Christ *here* – with you and among you, in the darkest and least promising places. And don't be afraid, when the time comes, to throw open the doors and venture forth into the adventure of faith to which Christ has called you: to be his witnesses, to be his hands and feet, to be nothing less than his partners in restoring hope to the world.

Nelson Mandela once said: 'We do not fear powerlessness. We fear being powerful beyond measure.'

Don't be afraid to believe...