

St John's Church, Kingston Park

Sunday Worship, 11th April 2021

*(If you are worshipping with others, words for all to say together are in **bold type**.)*

Welcome to worship with St John's on this first Sunday after Easter. Today, we are thinking about how Jesus appeared to his disciples after his Resurrection, and in particular, about the experience of Thomas.

Prayer

Lord, here we are. Many of us, in separate places,
joining in this worship, at this time and at different times.
And though we may be alone, or with only one or two others,
we are united in our desire to meet with you. We are one in your Spirit.
We are your church, even when we can't be at church.
You promised to be with us always, and you are here:

The Father, whose love always surrounds us;
The Saviour, whose death and resurrection give us life;
The Holy Spirit, sent to strengthen and encourage us.

So we turn towards you now, away from whatever we were doing before,
and we make this a time that's especially for you.

Help us to put aside our distractions,
so we can give you our full attention, our praise, and our love.

We take a moment to rest in your presence.

(A few moments of silence)

Amen.

An Easter song of praise: See, what a morning. (You may wish to listen on YouTube here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ET65Y1r3YeQ>)

See, what a morning, gloriously bright
With the dawning of hope in Jerusalem
Folded the grave-clothes, tomb filled with light
As the angels announce, "Christ is risen!"
See God's salvation plan,
Wrought in love, borne in pain, paid in sacrifice,
Fulfilled in Christ, the Man,
For He lives, Christ is risen from the dead!

One with the Father, Ancient of Days,
Through the Spirit who clothes faith with certainty;
Honor and blessing, glory and praise
To the King crowned with power and authority!
And we are raised with Him,
Death is dead, love has won, Christ has conquered;
And we shall reign with Him,
For He lives, Christ is risen from the dead!

See Mary weeping, "Where is He laid?"
As in sorrow, she turns from the empty tomb;
Hears a voice speaking, calling her name:
It's the Master, the Lord raised to life again!
The voice that spans the years,
Speaking life, stirring hope, bringing peace to us
Will sound till He appears,
For He lives, Christ is risen from the dead!

(Stuart Townend & Keith Getty)

Collect: a prayer for today.

Risen Christ,
for whom no door is locked, no entrance barred:
open the doors of our hearts,
that we may seek the good of others
and walk the joyful road of sacrifice and peace,
to the praise of God the Father. **Amen.**

Bible Reading: John 20: 19 – end.

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.'

²⁴ Now Thomas (also known as Didymus^[a]), 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.'

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^[b] that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

An Easter Poem.

This poem, *Recognising You* by Amy Scott Robinson, recalls some of the times Jesus appeared to his disciples after the Resurrection. (If you would like to hear it read, there is a Youtube video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j12TJruN7fl&t=3s> .)

Jesus in the garden, newly risen from the dead,
who stood by weeping Mary, and who heard the words she said
as if you were the gardener, till at last your shepherd's voice
called her 'Mary' and with one word gave her reason to rejoice.
Jesus in the garden, ever new but still the same,
help me recognise you in the speaking of my name.

Jesus on the journey, fellow traveller on the road,
who met two sad disciples, walking with them as you showed
the meaning of the scriptures that predicted you would rise,
but only when you blessed the meal could they believe their eyes.
Jesus on the journey, meet me where my hopes have fled,
help me recognise you in the breaking of the bread.

Jesus in the locked room, breaking through despair and doubt,
who comforted your friends when they had shut the whole world out,
who came again for Thomas, and revealed your hands and side
so that he could touch and know you as alive, though you had died.
Jesus in the locked room, breaking through our self-built bars,
help me recognise you in the touching of your scars.

Jesus on the shoreline, cooking breakfast for your friends,
who offered guilty Peter one more chance to make amends,
who filled a net with fish for him, and helped him to recall
the first catch that convinced him to respond to your first call.
Jesus on the shoreline, know my best, forgive my worst,
help me recognise you in the way I met you first.

Our reading from Acts tells how the believers were witnesses to the resurrection, both in their words and in their lives.

Bible Reading: Acts 4:32-35

³² All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. ³³ With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all ³⁴ that there was no needy person among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵ and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

Reflection

A few days ago I saw a cartoon about 'Doubting Thomas.' Sadly, copyright won't allow me to show it here, but it showed Thomas complaining, "All I'm saying is, we don't call Peter, 'Denying Peter' or Mark, 'Ran Away Naked Mark'." Poor Thomas - he does seem to be forever labelled with his worst moment. Actually, the Bible never calls him that. Thomas was a loyal follower of Jesus. When Jesus decided to go back to Judea because his friend Lazarus had died, even though people had tried to stone him last time he was there, it was Thomas who said 'Let's go with him' even though he thought they would be killed. And at the Last Supper, when Thomas didn't understand what Jesus meant, he said so. If you're a teacher, it's great to have a student who will ask all the questions that everybody else doesn't want to admit to having!

Have you ever done a jigsaw puzzle without the picture to guide you? Even if some parts come together quite easily, you can sometimes struggle to see how it's supposed to turn out. You can see that the sky's at the top and the grass is at the bottom – but where are those flowers supposed to go, and what are those bits of woodwork and tile? But then, you fill in some pieces and see some connections – and suddenly it's clear what the big picture is, and things start to slot into place.

I think Thomas has something of that kind of experience here. He's heard everything Jesus taught them about his death, but it didn't quite make sense. He heard the women say that Jesus' body had gone and they'd spoken to an angel – but, as Luke tells us, the other disciples didn't believe it. Later on, Thomas must have gone out somewhere. Perhaps he had something to do; or perhaps he just wanted some thinking time. When he gets back to the place where they're staying, everyone tells him that he's missed seeing Jesus. But he's not going to believe something like that without evidence. He wants to see and touch those wounds, those marks that will show him that it really is Jesus.

It's not wrong to have questions – they're a chance to learn. It's not wrong to have doubts, even – they can be the the point where we grow, if we handle them honestly and seek the truth. They may be the way that the faith we've received from our parents becomes our own, or the way we get to grips with the challenges of life. Thomas can't believe his friends' story, but he does know what sort of evidence will convince him, and, importantly, he does stay with the others. He stays in the place where Jesus is most likely to appear, in fact. He doesn't write off everything he's seen and heard in the last three years because he's struggling with this latest development. He doesn't distance himself from this group of people and all that they've shared – and they don't reject him. It's important that Christian communities provide space for those who are grappling with questions, without judging them or giving the message that if you express doubts, you're somehow suspect.

A week later, Jesus comes back, and as soon as he's greeted them, he goes to Thomas, and offers to show him his wounds - exactly what Thomas insisted on seeing. So now the pieces come together. On top of the empty tomb, and the other disciples' testimony, here is Jesus himself, appearing without opening the locked door, and there are the wounds in his hands. Thomas doesn't need to touch them; he can see for himself that this is really Jesus, alive. Perhaps he remembers, too, what Jesus said to him at the Last Supper. "If you really knew me, you would know my father as

well. From now on you do know him and have seen him." For Thomas, it all comes together, and he comes to another realisation. He falls to his knees and acknowledges Jesus as his Lord and his God.

Chapter 20 was probably intended at first to be the end of John's gospel – it's thought that the final chapter wasn't in the author's original plan. So things have come full circle, because if we look back to the very start of John's gospel, we read, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' The Word of God is Jesus, who has always been with God and is himself God – and here, Thomas recognises that Jesus is God.

In fact, he's the first person in the gospels who's shown addressing Jesus as God. Jesus has been called 'Son of God' – that was a title of the expected Messiah, and Jesus was that, too. But Thomas calls him, 'My God.' He's not 'Doubting Thomas' any more: he's actually taken a very big step of faith. Tradition tells us that he took that faith a very long way, as an apostle in Asia. Perhaps we should call him 'Believing Thomas' instead!

Jesus does have a gentle rebuke for Thomas: he says, "Stop doubting, and believe." And when Thomas does acknowledge him, he asks, "Do you believe because you have seen? Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe." Future believers wouldn't have the chance to see the risen Christ, as Thomas had. The people who believed on the day of Pentecost, those the apostles preached to in our reading from Acts – and those who saw the impact of resurrection faith and the Holy Spirit's power in the quality of life shown by those believers – they couldn't now see Jesus for themselves. Christians from then on, and in the centuries that followed, would come to faith through the testimony of others, both recorded in Scripture, and the witness of other believers, in their words and in their lives.

And of course, that's true of us today: we can't see Jesus for ourselves. We come to faith through the witness of others, and we can be part of that story for other people. The Lent course that some of us have been following included an interview with the Archbishop of York, Steven Cottrell. He described his own journey of faith, and how it came about not only through preaching, but through what he called the 'silent witness' of ordinary believers, whose faith somehow spoke to him through their lives. And Jesus says that those future believers – that we – are blessed.

The chapter finishes with a note from the author. This is why he's writing his gospel, John says - to record some of what Jesus did, so that those who read about Him could believe in Him and find life.

Prayers

The risen Lord went to his disciples, and showed them that he was alive, and gave them the assurance that they needed to have faith for the future. God our Father, we thank you that Christ is alive for ever, and that you seek out each one of us, and call us to have faith in you.

Lord of life, **bring life to your world.**

The risen Lord Jesus sent the disciples out in His name. Lord God, we pray for your church, and for this church, St John's. Make us all one in you; give us love for one another and a heart to serve those around us; and help us to seek and to do your will for us. We pray for Adele as she begins her sabbatical, and for Annie as she ministers here and at the university, and for all those with responsibility in the church, that you will strengthen and guide them as they do the tasks to which you have called them.

Lord of life, **bring life to your world.**

The risen Lord Jesus said, 'Blessed are they who have not seen but still believe.' We pray for those who are exploring faith, those who are seeking to find you, for those are struggling with doubt, and those whose faith is tested by persecution or difficult circumstances. May your Spirit lead them into truth and joy. Give courage and clarity to those who teach your Word, and to all of us as we seek to share your love with others.

Lord of life, **bring life to your world.**

The risen Lord Jesus brought the disciples a greeting of peace. We pray for those who are in turmoil or fear, that you will bring peace into their lives. We lift up to you those whose lives have been disrupted by war or violence, or by the consequences of the pandemic, and we take a moment to remember situations in the world that we are aware of... Lord, give strength to those who are weary, and comfort to those who mourn.

Lord of life, **bring life to your world.**

The risen Lord showed that life is stronger than death. We pray for those who are sick today, and those who may be close to the end of their lives. We lift up to you those in our own community who are suffering from COVID-19, and ask that your healing power will touch them. Surround them with your love and care, especially those who are far from friends and family, or feel fearful or alone. And we bring to you in a moment of silence those known to us personally who are ill or in any kind of distress.

Lord of life, **bring life to your world.**

Father of all, we bring you our prayers in the name of our risen Lord and Saviour, your Son, Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

Song: Christ is risen, He is risen indeed!

This song of praise that takes up the themes of today's gospel reading. You may want to listen on Youtube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OX-Xt-vBYPc> or you may prefer simply to read the words as praise.

How can it be, the One who died,
Has borne our sin through sacrifice
To conquer every sting of death?
Sing, sing hallelujah.

Once bound by fear now bold in faith,
They preached the truth and power of grace.
And pouring out their lives they gained
Life, life everlasting.
Christ is risen...

For joy awakes as dawning light
When Christ's disciples lift their eyes.
Alive He stands, their Friend and King;
Christ, Christ He is risen.

The power that raised Him from the grave
Now works in us to powerfully save.
He frees our hearts to live His grace;
Go tell of His goodness.
Christ is risen...

*Christ is risen, He is risen indeed!
Oh, sing hallelujah.
Join the chorus, sing with the redeemed;
Christ is risen, He is risen indeed.*

He's alive, He's alive!
Heaven's gates are opened wide.
He's alive, He's alive!
Now in heaven glorified.

Where doubt and darkness once had been,
They saw Him and their hearts believed.
But blessed are those who have not seen,
Yet sing hallelujah.

(Keith Getty, Kristyn Getty & Ed Cash)

Closing prayer.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

1 Peter 1:3 (NIV)

May the risen Lord lead us into life, keep us in his peace and send us in his power. And may the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be upon us and remain with us always. **Amen.**

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