

John 20.19-31

¹⁹ 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 Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So 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.'

²⁶ 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.' ²⁷Then 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.'

²⁸Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' ²⁹Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But 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.

SERMON

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

"When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week," the Gospel reading began. 'That day' is still Easter Sunday. All the happenings of Holy Week – the betrayals, the death of Jesus, the despair of Holy Saturday, the stunning resurrection of Easter Sunday – are all still very new and recent. The emotions of all the people involved are still very raw. We can imagine that the disciples were in emotional turmoil. They were probably both exhausted and excited, overwhelmed by the drama that has unfolded around them.

So when Jesus appears among them, he utters words that are immensely reassuring. 'Peace be with you': Shalom aleichem, the usual greeting in the Middle East even today. Arabic speaking people say Salaam aleikum. These are words that are at the same time comfortingly normal, and yet laden with meaning. Jesus comes, and he brings peace; he brings calm and healing into this emotionally charged situation. And it clearly works; for the disciples who are present are reassured; at last they have all seen Jesus and heard him speak, and they know – they KNOW! – that truly Christ is risen.

But Thomas, poor old Thomas, missed out. We've heard Thomas speak twice before in John's Gospel.

<https://wp-media.patheos.com/blogs/sites/429/2015/11/raising-of-lazarus-1.jpg>

The first time is when Jesus is about to set off for Bethany, where Lazarus is seriously ill; the threat of the religious authorities hangs heavy over them, and there is a discussion about whether they should go. Then Thomas speaks up: ¹⁶Thomas, who was called the Twin, [and the name Thomas, or Toma in Aramaic, actually means 'twin'] said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.' A touch of fatalism, maybe, or just an ironic or cynical comment? Lazarus is raised, famously, from the dead; and in this icon we see the disciples, including Thomas, gathered behind the Lord as Lazarus' tomb is opened.

The next time we meet Thomas is during Jesus' last day, and during his last discourse. Jesus is telling his disciples about what is to come. He says: "In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going." And Thomas responds "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" So we get a picture of Thomas – unimaginative, perhaps, a bit dour, someone who takes things literally. And, of course, it had to be Thomas the unimaginative who missed out on seeing Jesus, and whose response to the other disciples' excitement is almost inevitable. "What? you reckon you've seen Jesus? I'm not falling for that one. Unless I see him with my own eyes, and touch his wounds myself, I'm not about to believe you. Too far-fetched."

So, a week later – today, in effect – Jesus comes again, closed doors no barrier. This time Thomas is there, and this time there is no place for his doubt or unbelief. Jesus is there, before him. His hands still bear the mark of the nails; his side is still gashed open.

There is a famous painting of this scene by the Italian painter Caravaggio;

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e5/The_Incredulity_of_Saint_Thomas-Caravaggio_%281601-2%29.jpg

In it we see Jesus and Thomas with 2 more disciples, forming an intimate circle together. It is a vivid and visceral painting; we see Jesus guiding Thomas' hand right into the wound in his side (and Thomas' hand is none too clean). Thomas had said – unless I put my hand in his side, I will not believe; well, here he is, with his hand truly in Jesus' wounded side. Caravaggio gives Thomas the strangest expression – wrinkled brow, shock, astonishment; for this is the moment where Thomas is suddenly blinded by belief, and just before he cries out 'My Lord and my God!'; and he is doubting, unimaginative Thomas no longer. No more need of imagination, no more recourse to cynicism or irony. My Lord and my God – surely an instinctive, spontaneous cry from the soul.

But Jesus voices no criticism of Thomas; and in the painting, the two are close together, like the old friends that they are. It is as though Jesus, knowing Thomas' character, knows that he needs the proof, he needs to put his hand on Jesus and touch him. There is no criticism of his doubt, just an affirmation for those (like us, 2000 years later) who won't have the privilege or the opportunity of seeing Jesus in the flesh, or of touching his hands or his side. And perhaps for this reason – Thomas' need for proof and for the concrete things of life – that he is now seen as the patron saint of architects, builders, construction workers and surveyors, as well as theologians!

<https://www.domkirken.dk/page/146/thomas>

In this famous statue in the Dom church in Copenhagen, Thomas is depicted as thoughtful, pondering, even; and he carries a set square as a symbol of his need of precision and proof.

He is also the patron saint of India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, because Thomas went on, according to church tradition, to travel to India, and to found a church there in Kerala, often called the Malabar Christians, or Mar Thoma Church.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._Thomas_Syro-Malabar_Church,_Palayoor#/media/File:Palayoor_St._Thomas_Syro-Malabar_Church.jpg

He is said to be buried in Madras. There are also writings attributed to him, including a Gospel of Thomas. So the moment of sudden clarity which he experiences in today's Gospel is a prelude to a mission, one that has led to millions of people following Christ – millions who are 'Blessed although they have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

In the reading from Acts, we heard an excerpt from Peter's first great address in Jerusalem. We know that thousands of people heard him, and the other apostles, and also came to believe. This, perhaps, is the greatest testimony to the power of faith. Peter – clumsy, awkward Peter, who denied Jesus, who was rebuked by Jesus for misunderstanding him time and again – became a great preacher and leader of the church. Thomas – doubting, dour, unimaginative Thomas – travelled halfway round the world to found a whole new church. What a transformation was wrought in each of them!

And that is the power of faith in the risen Christ. Jesus accepts us all: us, the weak and cowardly, and transforms us into people of courage; Jesus accepts the doubting and the stumbling, and transforms us into shining beacons of faith; Jesus accepts the unloved and the lonely and transforms us into beloved and loving children of God.