

SERMON 11 APRIL 2021 – Acts 14.32-35, John 20.19 - end



Tabernacle of Cherves, Charente, France, c. 1225

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen,

If I had to choose a favourite bible passage, this piece from John 20 is probably it (or it comes a close second to “faith, hope and love” from 1 Corinthians 13). I was ordained on St Thomas’ day, 3 July 1995, and I have a very soft spot for doubting Thomas. Earlier in the gospels, Thomas is anything but doubting. He will go to Jerusalem with Jesus, even if it might be dangerous. Thomas is a brave man, he will follow his Lord. But, for whatever reason, he was not with the other disciples on the Sunday evening.

The other disciples – ten men, probably plus some others, probably including some women – are behind locked doors. And who can blame them? Their leader had been arrested, he had been crucified – and the disciples are frightened. They were known as Jesus’ followers, they were marked men – the religious authorities had turned against them, the Romans were against them. None of us can really comprehend that level of fear – although if we made more of an effort to understand what it is like to be afraid, we might be a more understanding society.



[Duccio](#), a panel from his [Maestà](#) (1308-1311)

But what about the rumours, the women had seen an empty tomb, Peter and John had seen an empty tomb – Christ is Risen, Alleluia ... so why are they behind locked doors?

I suspect that Christ is Risen was taking a while to get their heads round. After all, people do not come back from the dead. What had they seen? Who was he? Was he a human? Was he a ghost? What did it mean for them? It's about 2,000 years since the first Easter – and we're still trying to get our heads round it. These disciples have had about 12 hours.



6th century mosaic, Church of Sant Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna

Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' That's an amazing greeting. "Shalom", not just peace or a limp Anglican handshake (remember those?), but that incredible power which transforms fear into hope, transforms death into life.

I am probably speaking for most of us when I say I am struggling somewhat with "incredible power which transforms fear into hope, transforms death into life". It has been a very long year – and far, far worse for many people than it has been for me. Even though Prince Philip was 99 and his death was expected, it feels like the end of an era, and we share a sense of grief and sadness. Yet, in all of it, there is peace, there is resurrection faith, and we do believe that faith is what helps us make sense of where we are – and where we are going.



Caravaggio, The Incredulity of St. Thomas, 1601-1602

First Jesus assures them of his peace, and then he gives them a commission: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Sorry lads, you are not remaining in this

room, you are not remaining behind your locked doors. “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Go and do my will – there is work to be done.

I looked back to my first Low Sunday sermon in this church, when I preached on this passage four years ago. At that point I’d been in these parishes for nine months, and it was the Sunday of the Annual Parish Meeting. I said

“2,000 years later the message is the same – don’t remain behind your heavy closed doors, don’t remain a holy huddle, closeted here with your group of friends. There is work to be done.”

Four years ago I commented that *“We are tired churches, we are churches that have lost a lot of friends in the last few months, ... we are churches where we are all getting older, and it is easy to be depressed as the past has been great, and the future is not as confident.”*

And four years on, we have lost even more friends, though we do have new friends, and we have people who have stepped up to take the place of those we have lost. I needed to find volunteers to welcome at all the services from now until the end of July, plus people to read and pray. A flurry of emails, a flurry of email replies, and it is sorted. Thank you. We do need someone, a couple of people, willing to step forward to be churchwardens – and I need to ask yourself whether it is a job you can do. We need churchwardens, and I do believe that those churchwardens will have people to work with as a team.



I continue to be upbeat because I believe in Easter faith. Even when our buildings were closed, we have continued to live in faith. We are continuing to plan for the future, though it will be a very different future to the past we had – there are many challenges.

The lovely thing about our gospel, the lovely thing about Doubting Thomas, is that a week later, when the disciples were together again, Thomas was with them. He hadn't seen the mark of the nails, he hadn't seen the Risen Lord, he didn't believe. Had the other disciples tried to argue with him? Had they got cross because he didn't believe? Had they told him to go? Had they sat and chatted about all they had seen, and pushed Thomas to the sidelines?

No – he was there, he was with them, and he was welcome. I want a church that has space for the doubters, has space for those who struggle, where everyone is welcomed. I am still here because churches have had space for me – and we must be inclusive and have space for all.

Tradition has it that Thomas was the apostle who, once he believed, took the gospel far, far from Jerusalem. Tradition has it that he travelled east – away from the Roman Empire, through the area we know so well in this troubled world of ours', east through Iran and Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and into India. When, several hundred years later, European traders, Christian traders, arrived in India, they found a church already there – a church that traced its roots back to Thomas. I find that quite incredible – Doubting Thomas is the one who had such an amazing journey of faith. On this Sunday after Easter, God knows where our faith journey will take us – as individuals and as churches.

Peter Barham, 11 April 2021.