

## **SERMON 19 APRIL 2020 - Acts 2.14a, 22 – 32, John 20.19 - end**

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. Although Clive comments in his talk about Vicars who are away on Low Sunday, I always seem to be working on Low Sunday (usually because we have weddings or an AGM this weekend - indeed, if this year had been normal, it would have been three weddings and an AGM!). I’m not going to moan (too much) about working because I love this story.

A few weeks ago when we had the story of Jesus raising Lazarus, it is Thomas who says to the other disciples that “we will go with him, even if we will die with him”. 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.

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.

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”.

I phoned one of my ministerial colleagues the other day to check she was OK. She sounded really upbeat, was telling me how her church is invigorated, full of prayer and action, zooming and facetimeing all over the place, how she is busier than ever - and you can probably imagine what I said when I put the phone down. She may have found an incredible power - I haven't.

But I have had phone conversations with people who are stuck in their own upper rooms, frightened, unable to leave. I've done some practical good, I've made some food deliveries, I've listened, I've chatted, I've encouraged, and I think I've made things better. One of our ladies said “someone will get in touch and tell me when the churches are open again, won't they?” I assured her I had a list of difficult people I'm not going to tell - so if it gets to Christmas and she hasn't had a phone call, she'll know she's on that list. That tickled her sense of humour and made her feel better. I know there are many more phone calls I should make - please feel free to phone me. Thank you to the many of you who are making regular phone calls, calling to check people are OK - I know it is appreciated. We are doing this job together.

I'm writing a daily facebook post - Peter's ramblings - and several hundred people are reading it. I get some great responses. Some of my readers are members of our congregations, some are those on the fringes of our churches. I had a lovely conversation with a bride from a couple of years ago, who's now a mum, and assures us she wants baby baptised when all this is over. I've had folk from Ponteland and St Edmundsbury Cathedral making contact - the lovely Naomi contacted me the other day, apparently it's 21 years since I married her and Tim. They got married at Cockfield church, and we had the builders in. There was scaffolding outside church. One family got cross and wanted it moved for their daughter's wedding. Tim and Naomi were far more understanding. They brought a cardboard box full of hard hats, and we got a gorgeous photo of groom, best man, ushers and vicar holding Naomi, all of us wearing hard hats, under the sign which said “Danger, workmen overhead”. I'm also getting comments from some of our Derby University friends and some of Hannah's many contacts - comments about my baking, my photos, and my thoughts on faith. It takes an hour or so every day to do, but it is certainly worth doing.

I am finding a peace as I garden, read, walk, listen to music. No disrespect to either of our choirs - but it was rather nice last Sunday listening to Festal Choral Evensong from Norwich Cathedral. The responses were those by Ayleward - I

sang along with the priest's part (without music) and got it right. (When Radio 3 came to St Edmundsbury Cathedral for the live broadcast of Choral Evensong I was never allowed to sing! I'd usually get the prayers or one of the readings. There was one year when we had a lady with the first stages of dementia who was a regular at Evensong. Sometimes she'd go for a walk in the middle of the service or start shaking her keys. That's manageable on a normal day, but not when it's a live broadcast on Radio 3. My job was to catch her at the Cathedral door and take her for coffee well away from the musicians!).

Somehow in all of this, most of the time there is peace. Even on Friday, when I will stand with friends saying farewell to our friend Nic Barnard – even though all we can do at the moment is a graveside service with less than a dozen people, even though we are angry and grieving, even though I find it hard when I have to stand beside a grave, especially when I can't detach myself and go into professional mode - somehow I will find peace, even if I struggle to find peace at the time. We do have a resurrection faith, and we do believe that is what helps us make sense of all this.

Like the disciples, we stand in fear, we stand where death is a reality, and like the disciples we know Christ's presence is with us.

On the first Easter Sunday, the disciples knew this peace, they knew his presence, they saw his hands and his side – the marks of the nails, where Jesus had been crucified. Some of them would have been there at the foot of the cross, they would have watched the nails going in – again, I doubt any of us have ever witnessed such violence, such pain, being carried out on another human being. They know this is Jesus, and he has conquered all of that. “Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.”

Jesus assures them of his peace, and then 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 these churches, when I preached on this passage three years ago. At that point I'd been in these parishes for nine months, and it was the Sunday for one of the Annual Parish Meetings. 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.*

*A few weeks later, Peter is standing in front of the crowd. He is proclaiming Jesus' love, brave enough to proclaim to the leaders of his society that they had done wrong, they had killed the Lord's Messiah. They needed to know that God's Kingdom demands change and it demands work.*

*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.*

I then looked at all that had happened in the last few weeks, and all the baptisms and weddings that were in the diary - the amount of work we had done, and we needed to do. I asked the question ...

*So will people commit to come and welcome – or is it easier just to live in the past, when this church had its glory days? I just leave that question there ...*

I never thought that, three years later, we'd be closed completely. But we are continuing to live in faith, even though we are not meeting together. We are continuing to plan for the future, and we will be open and welcoming again in just a few weeks - and a few weeks is not very long when matched against the lifetime of our churches. When we re-open there will be many things to do - Clive had better write some more sermons, because this Vicar might need a weekend or two off to go and see his kids - and we will do them together, in joy and faith.

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, 18.4.2020