



# *Second Sunday after Easter*

## *Sermon by Revd Margaret Place*



Sunday 11 April 2021

### READINGS

Acts 4: 32-35; Psalm 133; 1 John 1:1 - 2:2; John 20: 19-31

## *Easter II*

Various interesting books have reached our notice in recent weeks, and they are assessing where we are at the moment. Some of them are looking at the social, political, psychological or economic results of a year of pandemic and its lockdowns. Most of them state that this year has simply speeded up trends and movements that were already there, and that our world is in the process of hugely disruptive change. We have all seen this, in that what spoke with the voice of authority when we were children – teachers, doctors, priests, lawyers, bank managers, shop keepers, government leaders, and others are now subject to close scrutiny, and have often been found wanting in fraud, incompetence, inappropriate sexual activity, and just plain nastiness. Our celebrities and leaders are viewed with cynicism and feature in the satire of cartoonists and stand-up comedians. Even the monolith of science has shown us that in the face of a pandemic, it is a process, not a panacea, and for all the genius of our medical scientists, and their unwavering dedication to find answers, mistakes are made, and back to the drawing board is a necessary part of the procedure. And even in science, it is also a case of where the money is spent and who gets what as a result. All this makes us feel very insecure, and perhaps not a little helpless in an environment with so much visible poverty and crime as a fallout of it all, and we can't be blamed if we think that the world is no longer a safe place to live in. Many of us live in a psychological locked room and we try to keep out of the firing line.

I wonder if the disciples felt something like that in the room behind their locked doors? The Jewish authorities in some respects had become nit-picking legalists in religious matters – probably in an attempt to keep some sort of Jewish identity in the overwhelming Roman world of its day, and the Romans – soldiers, governors and tax-collectors were everywhere, so their world was a very difficult, scary and ultimately disillusioned one. And then Jesus had come. Jesus had been everything they had hoped for – the Messiah who, if he was not actually was going to save the Jews from the Romans – and Jesus had never actually SAID that -, he was going to establish this amazing kingdom where there was justice and peace and love and God was the supreme authority. He had the courage to face up to the Jewish authorities, he saw faith in some Romans and in other foreigners, he stayed in the backwaters of Galilee and didn't court the great and the famous in Jerusalem and the preaching - oh wow! And the miracles, even more so.

And now, they were associated with a failed messiah, a king fallen foul of every authority there was, who had suffered an ignominious death on the cross along with the local thugs and extremist activists. If the miracle-making messiah wasn't safe, when were "they" going to come and get the disciples? So they hid behind closed doors. But their other fears could not be shut out. They had all, bar one (and the women), run away. If they had been braver, could they have not made a stand and salvaged something from this movement? They had given up all to follow him. What was left now? And would they have any credibility having "follower of Jesus" on their CV? And had all been an illusion? All these questions, and we have asked them too in the dark places of our lives.

But Jesus was suddenly in their midst. First, in the standard Jewish greeting, he gave them peace and showed them proof of his crucifixion. They were restored. The group was once again his disciples - but not exactly the same. He was commissioning them as he had done before, sending them to proclaim the good news of the kingdom, but now with even greater authority. Binding and loosing sins was, in their context, allied to the justice system, where an authority in the Jewish law could state your wrong doing had to be paid for according to the law, or that you were forgiven and free to go. If Jesus was giving them this authority, it means his kingdom is still a reality, and he is now setting up this form of the justice system within this new creation and they were the purveyors of this. Everything had come alive again with their master again, but now it was different.

This story is followed by the famous incident of Thomas. Doubting anything is part of the human experience, and our religious beliefs are not exempt from that. Anyone who thinks deeply will doubt from time to time, and it often brings us to new depths and greater understanding if we follow the uncomfortable mental processes that doubt requires. Was this in character for Thomas, or are we being told something else?

Previous pictures of Thomas show us someone who, like Peter, sometimes gets it and sometimes doesn't. We first see him in John chapter 11 where Jesus is talking about going to Jerusalem and the disciples are afraid he will be killed. However Jesus is going to "wake up" Lazarus – something which the disciples don't quite get, so Thomas proposes they go with Jesus, and anything that happens to Jesus in Jerusalem, well, they will die along with him.

The next time is part of John chapter 14, a passage much used in funerals where, Jesus ultimately states "you know the way to the place where I am going" and Thomas asks "we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" and Jesus replies, "I am the way the truth and the life." The third incident to feature Thomas is the denial passage in today's reading. We can see from these that Thomas is a realist. "If Jesus wants to go to Jerusalem, we'll go to and die with him." That's reality. "No Jesus, we don't know where you are going. Spell it out." And here "Jesus risen and appeared to you? Where's the evidence? I want to see it." No airy fairy esoteric is our Thomas.

Jesus takes him very seriously. A week later he appears to his disciples with the same greeting, and with it, the gift of peace. He invited Thomas to do the very thing he insisted upon – examine the wounds. Thomas

is completely bowled over, and is the first disciple to give voice to who Jesus actually is – “my Lord and my God.” It’s now been said. Jesus is the Messiah, the chosen one they have all been waiting for. Jesus’ following statement may be seen as a bit of a rebuke –“ you believe because you have seen, but blessed are those who have not seen but believe”, but I think there is more to it than that. All the disciples have seen the risen Lord, but their calling is now to spread the news of the risen Messiah to others who have not and will not ever be able to have that same physical proof. This means that those who believe without the proof will be truly blessed, and to make this happen is the challenge presented to these disciples. Their faithfulness in spreading the Good News is the very reason we are here today, with no evidence in a very skeptical age, and we are blessed to have Jesus as part of our lives. (tradition has it that Thomas was sent to India, place with many ancient belief systems and of evolved spirituality. If that is where a realist like Thomas is sent, it proves that not only does God move in mysterious ways, but that God has a sense of humour too.)

So where does that leave us in our chaotic world in these difficult times? Firstly, if we are in Christ as Christ is in us, we will without necessarily realizing it, embody that peace which comes with Christ. If we are commissioned as the early disciples are commissioned, we will be given whatever authority we need to carry out our various callings, and we can have the confidence that Jesus is truly with us. That knowledge engenders its own peace, because it can only come about with the presence of Christ.

Secondly, we have to show a world which has long since lost sight of Jesus, who he is, and we no longer have the foundation of religious education and a society founded on Christian principles. We have to present Christ with no tangible evidence and in an environment with many competing ideologies and influences, not all of them benevolent.

Finally, we need to know that even when we are in the firing line and things are at their most difficult, so we lock ourselves in a room of some sort out of fear and probably exhaustion, Jesus is there in our midst with his greeting “Peace be with you.” We are exactly where God needs us, and the comforter is never far away. Even if, like Thomas, we can only see death in our various Jerusalems, and we are totally confused about the way forward, we will always have those times where we see without any shadow of doubt, that “our Lord and our God” is truly risen, has conquered all, and is still working towards the fulfilment of the Kingdom.