

May the words ...
In the name ... +

From our reading from the book of Acts, the description of the apostles' time together after Jesus' departure: *The whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul.* And in a psalm we read, "*How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!*" How wonderful are these descriptions of a faithful community.

But in fact, I think we all know that such near-perfect times are not always achieved in our own lives, nor even back then in Jesus' day and in the times before that. There are really big themes that we talk about Sunday after Sunday here – life, love, sin, death, and eternity. And we, men and women, young and old, we struggle with them. Sometimes, we wonder, we have doubts or we do not understand.

Doubt? Well, that sounds as if it runs counter to those ideal situations, in our reading today and in that psalm. We may even think we had better just pretend we never have doubt. But if we are honest with ourselves, we have all probably had doubt. It is a very human thing, and, perhaps surprisingly, does not have to mean lack of faith. We may, of course, not have doubt, or not any more. But if we do, and if we are honest – God can take it! And Jesus will lead us back to him.

All this to say – the famous "Doubting Thomas" is the focus of what I'll talk about today. But the reading has several important parts, and I'll say something about the other parts too. We can "walk through" our Gospel reading together.

On Easter Sunday we read the glorious story of the women's discovery of the empty tomb – Jesus had risen! Today's Gospel picks up the story – it begins on the *evening* of that Easter Day. The disciples/apostles have been shaken to the core by what has happened on Good Friday. They have probably by now heard that Jesus is somehow once again alive, as he has promised. But then and now, it is almost too much to comprehend. And they are afraid - of the very people who wanted their beloved Jesus put to death. *What if it's their turn next?* Together, all of them except one, Thomas, they go to a house, hide away, and lock the door. But then, despite

the locked door, Jesus appears among them! He shows them his wounded hands and side. The disciples rejoice – their Master is not lost to them.

And then Jesus does another thing – he *breathes* on them, giving them the Holy Spirit. The breath of God as a bringer of life is a haunting idea we have heard before – from the reviving of the dry bones in Ezekiel, even to the creation of the universe and humankind. He then tells them that they now have authority to proclaim God's forgiveness of sins. He gives them a mission, a new life. For these disciples will be the beginning of the Church. Jesus knows he will return to the Father. He needs *people* – those very people who he loved and taught – to carry on his work. Jesus had wanted to see them, and had gone after them, to show himself and carry out this next very important step in his plan.

They were to be sent to show others the **peace** of Christ in the world full of strife, and the **life-giving power** of the Spirit which they have received from Jesus. For they, and we too, need Jesus – God with us – both to send us out in his name, and also to care for us, to teach us how to *be* in the world.

Now, the disciples really had been scared, as we were told. And you can bet that they were also sad, bewildered, overcome ... so little wonder that one of them, Thomas, had wandered on his own and not joined them on that Easter evening. And when his companions told him, later, that Jesus had come to them? Well, what he said is a famous part of his famous story – “Unless I see his wounds and touch them, I *will not* believe that he has risen”. This is doubt. But in it – can you also hear longing? Thomas, wishing that it *could really* be true?

But still the story continues. The scene changes – it's now one week after that first Easter. Just where/when we are today, on the second Sunday in Easter season. The disciples are back in the locked room, and this time Thomas is there too. I like that coincidence of timing, of hearing this particular Gospel passage on this particular day, for it helps me *imagine* the time Thomas had to think, to wonder, to feel, all those seven days ... imagine how he longed for this to be true.

Anyway, there they all are. And once again, despite locked doors, Jesus appears, and said “Peace be with you.” And then he turns to Thomas – and offers him the chance to do what he had only told his *friends* he would need to do to believe – to touch his wounds. “Put your doubts aside... I am really here” is what he is saying. And notice, we are not told that Thomas actually does touch his wounds. Instead, we are told that he simply answers – in words that had *never before* been used to address Jesus: “My Lord ... AND MY GOD.” Not just Lord, leader – but God, Lord *over all things*.

The Thomas we have been shown *is* a doubter, a realist, who did not always expect rosy outcomes. But he was brave and true. It was only he among the disciples who said, when Jesus was called to the side of Lazarus to perform a miracle, “Let us go too, so that we may die with him”. If Thomas is by nature a “realist”, has trouble accepting tales of Jesus coming back from the dead – we can see that he has been *honest* about it. And what changes when Jesus turns to him in that room is probably not his nature of being a realist. It is his perception of *what is the limit of reality*. Of what *is actually possible*. Of what God can do. And for each of us, that gift, that grace, of a change in understanding, can change everything for us!

Many people over the years have thought about the way doubt works in their faith journeys. Paul Tillich, one of my favourite thinkers in the time I was turning back to the church, gave me hope in his words: “*Doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith.*” Words that intrigued me and gave me courage to persevere. Faith is trust, and a faithful way of living *can* even sometimes include doubt. As I said earlier, we talk here about really big themes – life, love, sin, death, and eternity. And about the most amazing event in history – God coming among us in love to turn us all toward him. If we haven't already needed time to grapple with these things, perhaps at some point we will. It's serious and important stuff!

But to finish up our look at our Gospel – the last thing Jesus says to Thomas in this story is, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” This sounds, maybe, like a rebuke to Thomas – that was the impression I got in

Sunday School! – but I don't think so. Remember, the other disciples were also shown His wounds on that Easter evening; it's no different for Thomas. I think that what Jesus said was a commentary for all of us who would come after. *We*, every Christian for almost 2000 years, have not seen with our eyes, but *if* we have come to believe – it certainly *is* a blessing!

And that, we see, is what this whole Gospel according to John has been about. Leading us to faith. For our reading ends with these words:

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

So as we go out from here, as with the disciples who went out at God's command – we might remember that any doubts we have *are* acceptable to God, and that we too will know Him, and must do His work. Even if your journey towards God seems unsteady sometimes, even if the wait seems long, God is always there for you. Keep on, being yourself, in faith.

And then in our lives we can perhaps help others to open themselves to God's great peace.

Let us pray¹:

*Let us be renewed in the power of your Spirit
That we may open the doors
And go out into the world
To bring words of peace to the people we meet.*

*Let us be renewed in the power of your Spirit
That we may have life in your name
And go wherever you send us In Jesus' name.
Amen.*

¹ Church of Scotland "Starters for Sunday", for April 12, 2015