

## **Sermon For Second Sunday of Easter, Year A – April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2020**

St. Paul's Cathedral Sale (During the Coronavirus pandemic)

**Readings:** Acts 2:14a, 22-32  
Psalm 16

1 Peter 1: 1-12  
John 20: 19-31

### **Faith – An Unfolding Journey**

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Before I started my theological studies, I often found it difficult to comprehend much of what the writer of the gospel of John was getting at. That changed when I had the great pleasure and privilege of having Dorothy Lee as my lecturer for this gospel during my second semester of study.

As she took us through John's gospel - passage by passage - she brought that gospel alive for me opening my eyes to the journey of faith it takes its readers on opening up my heart and mind to new understandings - not only for my ministry as a priest some time in the future but for the unfolding of my own journey of faith then and now.

Central to this morning's passage is the unfolding of the journey of faith of Jesus' closest friends, his disciples – who hide in fear behind locked doors.

But it's not only the faith of the characters in the narrative that matters. The unfolding journey of faith for John's audience - those for whom this gospel is written is of paramount importance.

The last two verses of this morning's reading confirm this. This is what those verses say:

*“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But 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”. (John 20:30-31)*

This gospel is written so that the early Christian community may believe and have life in his name. This gospel is written so that we may believe and have life in his name. This gospel invites us into the lives of its characters – into their journeys of faith and in them to see our own journey of faith.

For each of us it is meant to be a journey from darkness to light - from being blind to being able to see - a journey that has the power to change our lives – and the lives of others, if we let it reach into the depths of hearts, our minds and our souls.

So – how can we let this morning's passage change us?

What power does it have for us as individuals and as the body of Christ as our journey of faith unfolds?

How does it speak into our current situation?

As I thought about that last question during the week, I was inspired to rewrite the first verse of this morning's passage. The original words of John are thus:

*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.'*

My words, for our context are:

*When it was not long into the new year, only a few weeks after the bushfires had ravaged much of the land, and the doors of the houses were locked for fear of the Coronavirus, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'*

“Peace be with you.” These are words we need to hear as we adjust to living our lives differently in these uncertain, difficult – and – yes – fearful times.

Earlier in the gospel, as he prepared his disciples for his betrayal and death, Jesus promised them peace - a peace that only he could give.

*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. (14:27)*

This is the peace that the risen Jesus now bestows on them - and their fear turns into joy. In chapter 14, verse 26, Jesus also promised his disciples that in his name the Father would send the Advocate, the Holy Spirit who will teach them everything and remind them of all that he has said to them. Now, in verse 22 of this morning's passage, after he has commissioned them to go into the world in his name and said “peace be with you” to them a second time, he breathes on them and says:

*‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’*

We, too, have received the gift of the Holy Spirit - Jesus' presence with us. Jesus has assured us – that in this way he is with us always. His Spirit is there for us now as we traverse these unknown and unsettling times. All we need do is to come to him in prayer and lay our fears and uncertainties at his feet. It is there that we can find comfort and peace, strength and hope for the journey ahead.

In their book, *Interpreting the Gospel and Letters of John*, Sherri Brown and Francis Moloney recognise that the commission of the disciples “*is guaranteed by a creative act on the part of Jesus, breathing the Spirit upon them, just as the Spirit hovered over creation in gen 1:2.*” (Page 301) The Holy Spirit is the one who can lead us to find new ways of doing things in this strange new reality. Instead of feeling disheartened because we can't do things the way we've always done them, when we call on the Holy Spirit we can be empowered to think outside the box, to use our own God-given creative skills to go on being the body of Christ in our homes and our communities, to nurture our own faith and the faith of others - to come to new understandings.

Many of us have more time than we did before to spend in prayer, more time to read scripture, more time to listen to songs of praise, more time to listen to the promptings – gentle or otherwise – of the Holy Spirit. The restrictions placed on us give us reason – and perhaps more time -to contemplate what it is that matters most in life.

I'm also aware that times like this can also cause us to question our faith. Like Thomas, we may doubt the truth that others so joyfully proclaim. Since my Sunday School days, I've always felt that the title “Doubting Thomas” was a bit unfair. If I look closely at the post-resurrection narrative in John 20, I notice that Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb while it is still dark. As Brown and Moloney point out in their book – “*For John darkness is an indication of a lack of faith.....She will come into the light but has a journey to travel*” ...*It takes three spectacular encounters to bring her to recognise Jesus and profess her faith in him.* (Pages 297 & 299)

It's not until the risen Jesus – whom she has mistaken for the gardener - calls her by her Hebrew/Aramaic name “*Mariam*” that she recognises him and comes to true faith in him. It is only then that she goes and does as Jesus has asked, telling the disciples what has happened to her and “*making her confession of faith*” - “*I have seen the Lord.*” (Brown and Moloney, page 300)

The disciples to whom the risen Jesus appeared to on the first day of the week believe when they hear him speak and when they see his pierced hands and side. Thomas – we are told – wasn't there that evening when Jesus came. People have speculated over the years about where he was.

I remember reading somewhere a suggestion that he could have been out doing the shopping for the disciples. If he was living in our time, we could suppose that he was out trying to buy toilet paper! That would – no doubt – keep him busy for a while.

Maybe he was out shopping but to the writer of the gospel this is not important. What is important is that when he returned the other disciples make a confession of faith - telling him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But, as we know, Thomas refuses to believe what they are saying that until he can see Jesus for himself and touch the mark of the nails and the wound in Jesus' side. For him that would be proof that Jesus is has risen form the dead and that he is the Lord.

If you'd missed Jesus' first appearance to the disciples and only heard about it second-hand - like Thomas, do you think you would have believed or would you have wanted to see for yourself? There's a good chance each one of us would have said exactly what Thomas said.

A week later, Thomas gets the same chance as Mary Magdalene and the other disciples - the chance to see the risen Jesus. Jesus challenges him: *'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.'*

Thomas makes his confession of faith - *'My Lord and my God!'*

Perhaps Thomas' doubt invites us to ask the questions we have about Jesus on our journey of faith and to seek the answers.

Perhaps his story challenges us to move to a fresh understanding of who Jesus is - to take another step in our commitment to him - a step that will inspire us to new life as we truly confess him as our Lord and our God. Amen.