

Scripture for Sunday April 19 2020

Acts 2:14a, 22-32 (NIV)

¹⁴ Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd:

²² “Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. ²³ This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. ²⁴ But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. ²⁵ David said about him:

“I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. ²⁶ Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest in hope, ²⁷ because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, you will not let your holy one see decay. ²⁸ You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.”¹

²⁹ “Fellow Israelites, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. ³⁰ But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. ³¹ Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay. ³² God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it.

John 20:19-31 (NIV)

¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” ²² And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

²⁴ Now Thomas (also known as “the Twin”), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.” ²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” ²⁸ Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹ Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

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.

¹ Psalm 16:8-11 LXX

Sermon: The Risen Jesus Encounters Thomas

At the beginning of John's Gospel, we read *in* Jesus was the divine life and that (his) "life was the light of *all* people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did *not* overcome it."² On Good Friday it certainly seemed like God's light had been extinguished for good. But three days later, "early on the first day of the week, while it was still *dark* . . ."³ John reports that an *empty* tomb was witnessed by Peter and someone he refers to as "the other disciple" – possibly John himself.⁴ They didn't really understand what this meant and so went home. Our gospel reading today relates John's account of what happened later that evening.⁵ The grieving followers of Jesus met together in a secure place because they were afraid the authorities might be seeking to arrest them.

There are a lot of people shut in their own homes right now who are afraid for different reasons. Not only are we afraid of getting COVID-19, we fear for our family members and loved ones, for our jobs and the state of the global economy. Like for the disciples – *and for John's readers* - the *root* of this fear is an *uncertain* future. *And* just like for *us* today, *they* were also *confused* because they didn't know *who* to believe. In their case, Mary Magdalene had earlier come to the disciples exclaiming "*I have seen the Lord!*"⁶ and had told them what the risen Jesus had said to her. It would seem that they didn't believe Mary's news. In the midst of this anxiety and confusion, we're told "Jesus came and stood among them."⁷ If the stone could not keep Jesus *in* the tomb, why should we think a closed door would keep him *out* of the room? Jesus then says the usual words of greeting that were powerfully appropriate in the moment: "*Peace* be with you."⁸ Who needs to hear those words of Christ today? (PAUSE) John doesn't tell us their initial reaction, but my guess is they were even *more* perplexed and alarmed! He tells us that Jesus then showed them his hands and his side after which the group of followers⁹ *rejoiced* because they recognised it was the risen Jesus."¹⁰ It was the wounds – or maybe the scars – of crucifixion on his hands and side that helped convince them that *this* was "the Lord" and not some ghost or spirit or - for that matter - an imposter.¹¹ As I mentioned last Sunday when we considered Matthew's account, John also indicates the resurrected Jesus has a *real* body.¹² This is the consistent message of the New Testament, though many Christians today, because of the merger of Christianity

² John 1:4. (NRSV) See also 7-9 for the continuing "light" theme.

³ John 20:1.

⁴ See John 20:2-10. I am omitting Mary Magdalene's role here for simplicity, along with her encounter with the risen Jesus.

⁵ John 20:19-23.

⁶ John 20:18.

⁷ John 20:19.

⁸ John 19:19b. or "*Shalom*."

⁹ The way John uses "the twelve" and "disciples" in his gospel indicates that *this* particular group is *not* merely 10 men.

¹⁰ Or, explicitly, "the Lord," John 20:20.

¹¹ See Luke 24:36-43. John has the group, like Mary earlier, recognises Jesus as "the *Lord*."

¹² See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/What-Happened-And-What-Does-It-All-Mean-1.pdf> . Naturally, this not the same *kind* of body as we currently have. It is both continuous (recognisable as the same person) and discontinuous (an imperishable or incorruptible body); see 1 Cor 15. From the gospel accounts, Jesus comes and goes as though he belongs in *both* our world and in a different world, one which intersects with ours at various points.

with Greek thinking in the intervening centuries, believe that life after death is a *purely* spiritual existence. In which case, if you think about it, our physical bodies are expendable. But that is *not* the biblical view, and the bodily resurrection of Jesus is a vital data point that gives us a glimpse of the future in the present, together with the many healings Jesus did - all of which would be essentially pointless if all that was ultimately important was a spiritual or non-physical existence. Indeed, *if* that were the case, *then* COVID-19, cancer, and other diseases that can result in death would ultimately *win*. Put another way, our physical sufferings wouldn't really matter and there would be no rescue for God's good creation.¹³ That is one good reason the resurrection changes everything!

Before we move on, I want to pause briefly and remind you that John's *readers* would have recalled what Jesus told his disciples earlier in John 16, just prior to his arrest: "You have sorrow now, but I *will* see you again, and your hearts *will* rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you."¹⁴ John now describes the disciples as "rejoicing" at seeing the risen Christ, at which point Jesus *again* says, "Peace be with you." I suggest this repeated greeting would remind both Jesus' followers *and* John's readers the words Jesus said earlier in John 14, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you," said Jesus, "I do not give it to you as the world does. Do not let your hearts be distressed or lacking in courage (NET)."¹⁵ Later, in John 16, Jesus concludes his words of encouragement to his followers, saying "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you *will* have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."¹⁶ The way John tells it, these two promises of peace and joy are fulfilled by the end of the Gospel. An important basis for this blessing of peace is that it ultimately arises because the last and dreaded enemy, death itself, has been defeated in the resurrection. I hope that those who are anxious and living in fear can gain comfort from these words of Jesus and the powerful message of the resurrection.

Incidentally, you might ask, why didn't the risen Jesus reveal himself publicly to everyone at this time? If you think about it, that would *compel* belief and so it would overrule the *need* for faith.¹⁷ It's *not* God's way to *force* us to believe in him for God respects human freedom.¹⁸ Faith is *always* an invitation, as we will now see in the subsequent story of Thomas.

Thomas wasn't there with the others on that occasion; we don't know why. So it was with joy and excitement the group tells Thomas, "*We have seen the Lord!*"¹⁹ Thomas, however, is not impressed; he doesn't believe it. He wants hard evidence – what we might call "proof" today – without which he would

¹³ God's creation is proclaimed "good" in Gen 1:25,31.

¹⁴ John 16:22 (NRSV) - see also 19-22 and, indeed, through to v33.

¹⁵ John 14:27 (NET). This is spoken in the context of the coming Holy Spirit (see 14:26; 20:22) and ascension (14:28; 20:17).

¹⁶ John 16:33.

¹⁷ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/The-Temptation-of-Jesus.pdf> . This points to Jesus rejecting that specific temptation *before* his ministry began.

¹⁸ That would, in effect, override free will. (We would have *no choice* but to accept the evidence.) I believe free will is part of what it means to be made in the image of God. Such divinely-bestowed freedom is necessary for *both* love *and* faith.

¹⁹ John 20:25. (Which is exactly what Mary had told *them*; John is a wonderful dramatic story-teller!)

never believe. That is why we love Thomas, because he is the incredulous nonbeliever, the skeptic who hides inside of every person - including believing Christians - since he resists easy answers to hard questions of faith. How does Jesus respond to Thomas? Jesus *seeks him out*; Jesus *takes the initiative* and *invites* the scrutiny, in this case for Thomas to examine his wounds.²⁰ Then Jesus makes this exhortation: “*Do not be unbelieving, but believing*”, or “*do not be faithless, but faithful*” – the word “doubt” is not used in the Greek. After all, you have to believe in something *first* before you can *doubt* it! What Jesus says, according to John, is this: “Do not continue in a state of unbelief when all the evidence demands belief.”²¹ Jesus is not shaming or reprimanding Thomas, rather he dramatically gives Thomas what he needs for faith. In John’s theology, it is *unbelief* that is sin, *not doubt*.²² Indeed, Jesus providing an individual what he or she needs for faith is a feature throughout John’s gospel - just re-read the encounters of the Samaritan woman at the well,²³ the healing of the man who was born blind,²⁴ the raising of Lazarus,²⁵ even Nicodemus,²⁶ and you will see that is indeed the case.

Thomas’ response to this resurrection appearance is, “My Lord and my God.”²⁷ “Lord” and “God” are the Greek equivalents of two Hebrew words for God.²⁸ Thomas recognises *God fully revealed in Jesus*. Earlier in John 14, Jesus says to Thomas, “If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you *do* know him and have *seen* him.”²⁹ It seems Thomas didn’t really understand those words until now. While his intellectual honesty may make him slow to believe, yet after his encounter with the risen Christ, Thomas makes one of the most profound acclamations of faith in whole of the New Testament.³⁰

John then implicitly addresses his readers, including you and me. He tells us Jesus’ reply to Thomas: “Have you believed because you have seen me? *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*”³¹ You see, John’s gospel was *not* written to skeptics to present so-called “proofs” for faith. No, he was likely writing to a troubled church that was being oppressed by those who where

²⁰ The whole point of this story is that the person before Thomas is the *same* Jesus, as evidenced by the marks of the nails on his hands and the wound in his side.

²¹ John 20:27b (NET). Note: the notion that *to “doubt is to sin”* is a modern idea and should be ignored. Recall too that Paul says we “walk by faith and *not* by sight (2 Cor 5:7),” hence the opposite of faith is *not* doubt but *certainty*.

²² It is *not* a sin to question, seek evidence, to require convincing. Jesus comes to us where we are at. One of the key points of the story is that Jesus *comes* to us and *reveals* himself to us, wherever we might be – even if that is out at the far edge of faith, so much so that we have forgotten even how to believe. And there is another thing; just like the disciples, we might not recognise Jesus straight away because of our preconceived ideas.

²³ John 4:1-42.

²⁴ John 9:1-41.

²⁵ John 11:1-45. Incidentally, Lazarus was *raised* to life but would die again; Jesus was resurrected *never* to die again.

²⁶ John 3:1-31 and 19:39 suggests Nicodemus is now a follower of Jesus.

²⁷ John 20:28. See also John 1:1.

²⁸ Namely, YHWH and *Elohim*. In a Greco-Roman (non-Jewish) world, these words speak of “deity” and “Caesar” – ultimate supremacy.

²⁹ John 14:7.

³⁰ It echoes that of Martha just prior to the raising of her brother Lazarus from the dead; John 11:27.

³¹ John 20:29.

wanting Jewish Christians to be expelled from the synagogues.³² Many of the things he writes was therefore to inspire his readers to *maintain* their faith, rather than a means to convert others. Of course, that doesn't mean a sympathetic non-believer, one familiar with the language and imagery John uses, would not be moved or persuaded by John's powerful account.³³ Having said that, John's readers were facing opposition from devout Jews who did obviously *not* recognise Jesus to be the Messiah. John therefore stresses the *identity* of Jesus from the beginning to the end of his gospel, including this affirmation of faith by Thomas, as a means of encouragement and exhortation to his readers to hold firm in their belief in the distinctiveness of Jesus.³⁴ This context allows us to make sense of John's ending, where he speaking directly to his readers, saying: "Now Jesus performed many other miraculous signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are recorded so that *you* may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing *you may have life in his name.*"³⁵

This conclusion got me to think a bit more. Many people today say they believe in God and that Jesus was a *good* man, even credit him as a holy man who was wise and who had a reputation for miraculous healings. But I just don't think John presents us with that option. John's purpose in his whole gospel is for *all* his readers to get to the same conclusion that Thomas did: to see God *fully revealed* in Jesus and say, "*My Lord and my God.*" Its purpose is not merely to believe Jesus rose from the dead – rather the resurrection is another sign of his *identity*.³⁶ John wants us to recognise that Jesus is simply God in *human* form or God *enfleshed*. Just go back to the opening of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word *was* God. The Word *became* flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."³⁷ That Jesus who *came* from God's glory has now *returned* to God's glory, via the cross and resurrection.³⁸ Put another way, I think John wants *us* to see – like Thomas - that Jesus is *divine* as well as being the Messiah or God's Chosen One.³⁹ That being the case, this means God *is* personally *engaged* in history, and continues to be by his Spirit. According to John, the risen Jesus gave the gift of the Holy Spirit in his commissioning of the Church on that Easter Sunday evening.⁴⁰ Consequently, the Church's life is intimately bound to Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. In celebrating the resurrection,

³² This only began to occur after AD80. See also John 9:22; 12:42; 16:2.

³³ This itself would be a revealing work of the Holy Spirit.

³⁴ Together with the life, teaching, miracles (signs), cross, resurrection of Jesus – the whole 'package.'

³⁵ John 20:30-31. [John 21 is thought to have added later, likely by a member of the John's community.]

³⁶ See also: <https://securereservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Who-is-Jesus-Come-and-See.pdf> . Note to the many "I AM" statements in John's gospel and their significance.

³⁷ John 1:1,14. (see also 18).

³⁸ And ascension – implied in John 20:17. The triple "glorification" of Jesus is a key theme in John, along with Christ's "glory."

³⁹ For many its big jump from prophet to divine being! If, however, someone admits Jesus was a holy man or a prophet (i.e., God's messenger or a conveyor of divine wisdom), then the obvious supplementary question is, "If you believe Jesus *was* a prophet, presumably therefore *sent* by God,³⁹ why *didn't* you believe what he said!? [Jesus uses this argument in response to the trick question asked by the Jewish leaders; it concerns the authority of John the Baptist; see Matt 21:23-27.]

⁴⁰ See John 20:21-13 where Jesus anoints them with the promised Holy Spirit, God's very presence. This is John's little "Pentecost" (see Acts 2) and commission (see Matt 28:1-20). Jesus breathing the Holy Spirit on the disciples is also described as a new, second creation and the Holy Spirit sustains the new life.

we are also, therefore, celebrating the beginning of the Church's *mission to the world* – and right now the world needs that message of hope, forgiveness and peace – together with the promise of new creation. Whatever, the new “normal” will be after this COVID crisis recedes, it will be an exciting opportunity for the Church, empowered by the Spirit of God who raised Jesus from the dead, to again model – at least in part - what the “new creation” means, as we embody Christ's love, forgiveness and peace together as a vibrant community of his faithful followers.

In conclusion, people have all kinds of doubts - even unbelief – about God these days. “Why doesn't God do *more*?” “Why doesn't God do *something*?” Both questions arise out of human suffering.⁴¹ God *has* done something; he came in the person of Jesus to reveal himself to us - and *we killed him*. Darkness doesn't like the light. But, thankfully, that is not the last word because God raised Jesus from the dead to die no more and conclusively overcame evil's power through suffering love. This is not necessarily the response to our questions that we might want! But it *is* decisive, divine action and, with the help of God's Spirit of truth,⁴² we can have our eyes opened to that illuminating light as we continue to figure out what it all means in practice for today. Whatever that might be, we can know one thing for sure, darkness still doesn't like the light. Even so, “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness will *not* overcome it.”⁴³ Amen for that! Peace be with you. Let us pray.

⁴¹ We have addressed this at St. Andrew's in the book study of Richard Rice's *Suffering and the Search for Meaning* (IVP,2014). See also Reddish, *Does God Always Get What God Wants? An Exploration of God's Activity in a Suffering World*, (Cascade, 2018).

⁴² John 16:13.

⁴³ John 1:4. See also 7-9 for the continuing “light” theme.