

**SERMON 23 APRIL 2022 – Acts 5.27-32, John 20.19 - end**



*Tabernacle of Cherves, Charente, France, c. 1225*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen,

As you know, 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, so one of the Covid sadnesses is that we weren’t able to have a party (or a work meeting) to celebrate the Silver Jubilee of my Ordination.

I have a very soft spot for doubting Thomas – I may have served God in lovely places, but it’s not been a simple journey, and I have not found faith easy. I am very grateful for those who, when the world fell apart, have kept me going.



David was the Hospital Chaplain at West Suffolk in Bury St Edmunds. When Gareth was first ill, we had spent six hours in that hospital before being transferred to London. Two months later we got back to Bury – Gareth was still alive, a miracle in itself, but would need a new heart. I was not in a good place. I had been away from my Cathedral colleagues for too long, and felt very separate from all the religion part of my life. David said to me “Sunday tomorrow, since you’re here, we’ll do the service together in the hospital chapel. You can celebrate communion.” I tried to tell him I was not in a good place, I could not stand behind an altar. “You’re a priest. It’s your job” was basically his reply. He was right, and I did the service – and without him, basically pushing me back into work, I doubt I would be here today.

We talk about “doubting Thomas”, but in the gospels, Thomas is anything but doubting. He will go to Jerusalem with Jesus, even if it might be dangerous.

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, almost certainly 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 and women – the religious authorities had turned against them, the Romans were against them. None of us can really comprehend that level of fear – though we see it on the faces of people in Ukraine. We see it in the faces of those who protest on the streets of Russia, those who face arrest because they will say that the War is wrong. I wonder what has happened to those men and women who were arrested for their protests – may God be with them.



[Duccio](#), a panel from his [Maestà](#) (1308-1311)

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.



6th century mosaic, Church of Sant Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna

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 or the friendly wave we give each other, 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 was at a meeting earlier this week and one of my more evangelical brethren was telling us all the wonderful things the Spirit is doing in his church. Then he asked "and where is your church going?" As I had spent a morning trying to sort out the rotas for the next four months, the obvious answer to that question is "on holiday, most of my lot are going away" – and, you know what, I'm very glad you are! We all need to recharge our batteries, we all need to see those friends and families we haven't seen for so long, we need to be out there in the world. I need a holiday, we all need a holiday!



Yesterday we had a day off. Went to Leek, lovely little market town. The staff at Costa were rushed off their feet, I was patient and friendly, hope I planted a bit of the Holy Spirit. An autistic lad in Oxfam was having a meltdown as he wanted Mr Men books, his mum was doing her best to calm him, the staff were being lovely, though they were getting stressed. I hope our patience, our smile, our conversation were a bit of the Holy Spirit. We found the Leek and Rudyard Light Railway – and I chatted to the lad in charge about everything from how Gareth used to drive on the South Tynedale Railway through to the problems of getting coal. They lost their Santa Specials (a big fund raiser) because of Covid, I told him we'd lost our Christmas Eve services. I'm not sure he'd ever spoken to a Vicar before, but I hope there was a bit of the Holy Spirit in that conversation. Then we had supper with some friends – and Sue's undergoing hospital treatment at the moment, so I hope we were some normality, some love and support. We drove back from Cheshire the pretty way – Congleton up to Buxton – that certainly raised my spirits. It may have been a day off, but the Spirit wasn't absent!



Caravaggio, The Incredulity of St. Thomas, 1601-1602

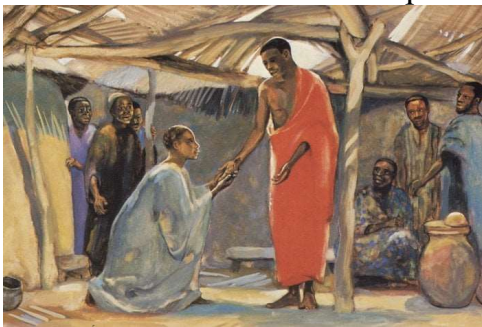
Going back to that Upper Room. First Jesus assures them of his peace, and then he gives them a commission: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Sorry lads, you are not remaining in this room, you are not remaining behind your locked doors. “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Go and do my will – there is work to be done.

We have an AGM in a fortnight’s time – Sunday 8 May, in church, immediately after this service. We need more people to step forward to be on the Parochial Church Council, to help with the practical things like Sunday coffee, like welcoming over the Jubilee weekend, being here for baptisms, sorting the church, the churchyard, sharing our faith, being the church in this place – sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ in word and action. We have lost some, many, of those who used to do these jobs – we need to involve others. I’m not very good at enthusing others to get involved, I’m too much of a control freak, and I too often do things myself – I know, I’m sorry. It’s not easy to ask people to do jobs, to encourage and enthuse, when we can’t even sit and have coffee together. We have new faces in our congregation, but I’m useless at names – and when I’m only here once a fortnight, it’s even harder, and when so many of us are having holidays – it is a bit of a vicious circle really. If you’d be willing to help do more, please talk to me, to Michele, to Paul, to Caroline in the Office (and if we’re not forthcoming or, in my case, rather disorganised, please try again). None of us are perfect, things do get forgotten and lost. I do believe in Easter faith. Even when our buildings were closed, we have continued to live in faith. As we move into the future, we are journeying in faith, we are journeying in the power of the Spirit.



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.



I love this story because 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, 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, 23 April 2022