

Second Sunday of Easter

19th April 2020



Dear Friends in Christ,

'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' And with that, He breathed on them saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit.'

(John 20: 21 & 22)

I pray this email reaches you in good health and in reasonable spirits as we continue to traverse Lockdown together through these 'newsletters.' It has been wonderful to receive so many positive emails and letters telling me how much you are enjoying my reflections. I am moved to think you have found the peace of our loving Lord through my ramblings! And I give thanks for the many technologies and neighbourly actions which are keeping us in touch with each other in many inventive ways - helping us to journey in faith and supporting one another to get through this crisis as best we can. I hope you have been able to join or listen to the Thursday evening 'Clap for Carers,' which has become another regular feature of the new ways we are finding to communicate with each other; sharing gratitude and love across our country for all those who are risking their lives to save ours.

In these days of Coronavirus, even the actions of Christ might be received in a less than welcoming way. *'And with that He breathed on them,'* in the narrative of current inter-personal isolation might have made Jesus headline news, but for all the wrong reasons! Yet Jesus' breath is not here the distressing actions of a misguided individual threatening to spread COVID-19 by coughing or spitting on another, but the actions of our Risen Saviour in bringing His peace to those He loved.

John's account of the turbulent time just after Jesus' death and apparent resurrection offers us a prescient message in our own times of anxiety and isolation. We meet the disciples huddled together in an Upper Room in Jerusalem. We hear they are

frightened and feeling isolated; terrified of reprisals from Jewish leaders and the Roman Occupied forces. Their world had literally crashed around their feet: their charismatic leader violently crucified, His body missing ...and the disturbing experience that He had been seen raised from the dead! All those heady days of healings and miracles, of enjoying the privilege of listening to their beloved Jesus bringing scripture alive - all lost to them now, replaced with grief, disbelief, isolation and despair.



'On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, Jesus came and stood among them' by Rev Henry Martin

Suddenly though, Jesus is here amongst them – no fanfare, no grand entrance, not even a knock on the door. Jesus is simply present amongst the disciples, just as He always was. Full of Peace and love for His friends, full of compassion for their predicament; full of His abundant grace and pouring out His Spirit upon them as He commissions them to go out and continue His saving work.

John tells us how the disciples *'rejoiced when they saw the Lord.'* Well, *almost* all of them. Thomas was not there! So, where was he? John does not bother us with that superfluous detail. It is enough for us to understand that Thomas simply was not there. He was not part of the group's re-union experience with their dear friend; not able to witness Jesus' same-but-different resurrected body; not able to verify the wounds of His passion and torture, or to receive His much longed for Peace. Nor was Thomas present to gulp down Jesus' precious breath which carried upon it the life-filled, restorative wisdom and healing authority of the Holy Spirit.



'And the Spirit of God Moved Over the Waters' by Mike Moyers

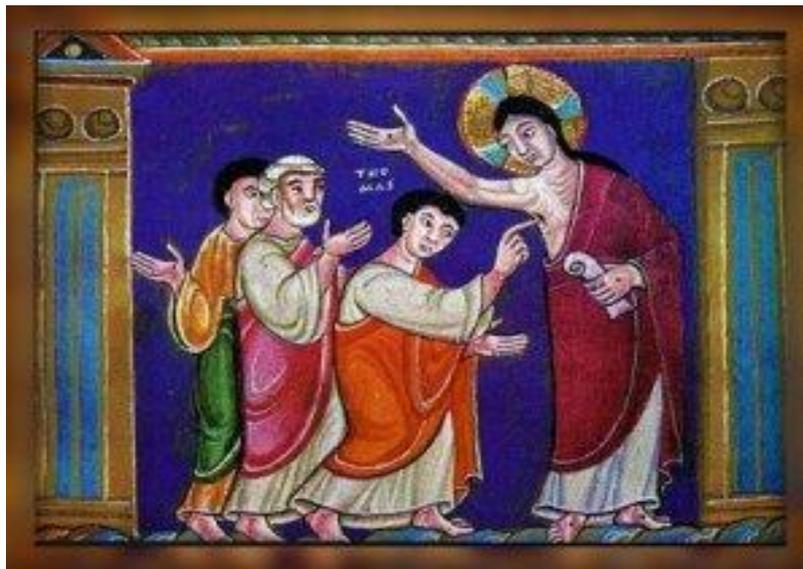
In Genesis 2: 7 God *'breathed the breath of life into mankind, giving us our worth and our being'* and here, John records how Jesus gave this same Creational gift to his precious followers now. Yet Thomas was not there. From John's telling of events, we can only speculate how Thomas must have felt on his return. John records that eight agonizing days and nights passed by before any resolution to Thomas' agitation occurred. Perhaps Thomas separated himself from the others during this time as they speculated on the miraculous events of their breath-taking, breath-giving encounter with the Risen Christ which gave them back their hope, their purpose, their faith.



The Incredulity of Thomas by Caravaggio

Eight long days, and then... there He was for a second time. Yet again, his arrival was purposeful. He greeted them all, but this time spoke only to Thomas, inviting him to finger His wounds and to personally witness the reality of His resurrection. In this moment, Thomas came face to face with the absolute truth of God incarnate. Notice how Jesus doesn't criticise Thomas for his doubts. Instead, He stills his fears and allays his doubts in an intimate, physical moment which helps Thomas to touch and feel and hold onto the reality of Jesus' resurrected presence there amongst them. *'My Lord and my God!'* Thomas exclaims, as the truth of what has happened hits home for him.

The simplistic, historical image portrayed of *'doubting Thomas'* is unacceptable in today's world. We would be making a mistake if we dismissed Thomas as a man of little faith simply because he was disheartened and despairing after witnessing Jesus' crucifixion. We know in our current circumstances how nothing isolates us more than fear and uncertainty. Thomas' actions are simply a natural response to that anguish. Yet our loving Christ knows that we each come to Him in different ways. For some of us, there is an immediate connection and Jesus blesses this instinctive faith. Jesus also knows that some of us *don't* function like that. Some people *need* to doubt before they believe. Jesus is wise to understand that belief in Him will come to Thomas, just as it will come to many of us as we journey with Him, questioning and experiencing and dwelling and growing in the truth of His love, day by day.



Icon of St Thomas Believing

In our world so full of uncertainty, Thomas is here to reassure us that an honest, open and inquiring mind can lead to a deeper understanding of the truth; especially when it comes to questions of faith. Thomas' profound doubts are those of someone seeking faith and searching for concrete answers. There is nothing shameful in demanding answers to our uncertainties and confusion in this way. We each of us know what it feels like when tragedy hits our lives; that when life hurts, how glib answers are simply not helpful at all.

The Easter story of Christ's crucifixion, death and resurrection is fundamental to our Christian faith. The joy we feel when we meet with Christ comes as a result of a deeply personal journey inwards, just as it did for Thomas, where profound and searching questions *must* be asked in order for us to truly proclaim Jesus as *'My Lord and my God!'* This episode with Thomas challenges us to be honest about our fears; to confront them and to let the Risen Christ take root in our hearts. Through the mystery that is Easter, God has given us New Life through the grace and power of His Son at work within each of us. In His Easter message last week, the Archbishop of Canterbury reflected on hope in dark places and explained that we are not alone: *'In the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have a hope that is surer than stone; than any architecture. Even in the dark days of this Easter we can feed on hope. We can dream of what our country and our world will look like after the pandemic.'*

In his Easter message back in 2014, our own Bishop Tim Dakin also reflected on this aspect of Easter hope. His words then are equally apposite in 2020: *'As Christians we are committed to showing our faith in actions, by volunteering and by loving our neighbour as ourselves. Why? Because Jesus is risen from the dead. There's transforming new life in Him - and we want to share it with everyone.'*



After seeing Captain Tom Moore walking 100 laps of his garden, The Department of Work and Pensions declares him fit for work. [@bennettarron](#)

What Bishop Tim meant is that through Easter, and through Jesus' resurrection, *everything has changed*. That group of frightened, isolated disciples huddled together in terror in the back end of Jerusalem were transformed forever when Jesus proved to them that He had risen from the dead. They were filled with the Holy Spirit and sent out to share the truth of His Good News *with all* who had hearts to receive it. This is what it means to be Christian, to be an Easter people! And Jesus sends *us* out in that very same way – even in Lockdown.

In this past week, we have seen the actions of one dear, faithful, pragmatic man speak more eloquently into the Easter message of love and service than I think we have witnessed in a long while. Ninety-nine year old Captain Tom Moore has raised over £18 MILLION for the NHS by walking 100 laps (and counting) of his Bedfordshire garden before his 100th birthday. It is moving to see the look of astonishment and joy on his face as he realises the enormity of the impact of his small, selfless actions given in love. I suspect that same look shone from the face of that other Tom as he too realised the power of love present before him in that Upper Room.

Captain Tom is a powerful exemplar of what is possible in our lives too. Even in Lockdown, Christ has the power to enter the doors of our hearts just as He entered that Upper Room long ago. Today, we have an opportunity to give thanks to God for all he has given us. We must reach out in service and in prayer to those in our

community who are in need and transform them in Jesus' name. Our hope is that one day soon all the earth might sing: We are an Easter people and our song is Alleluia!

Yours, in Easter faith!

Jax

Revd Jax Machin, Rector, The Downs Benefice

Collect Prayer for the Week – The Second Sunday of Easter

Almighty Father,
you have given your only Son to die for our sins and to rise again for our justification: grant us so to put away the leaven of malice and wickedness that we may always serve you in pureness of living and truth; through the merits of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

John 19-31: Jesus Appears to His Disciples

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!' After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.' If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.'

Jesus Appears to Thomas

Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. 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.'

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!' 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.' Thomas said to him, 'My Lord and my God!' Then Jesus told him, 'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'

The Purpose of John's Gospel

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. 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.

