

## 11<sup>th</sup> April 2021 – Easter 2 – Chris's Sermon.

John 20:19-31

'Thomas, one of the twelve, was absent when Jesus came. So the other disciples kept telling him, "We have seen the Lord". But he answered, I'll never believe without examining the marks of the nails and putting my hand in his side".

'A week later, Jesus came and stood in front of them, and Thomas was with them. Then he told Thomas, "reach out your finger and examine my hands, and put your hand in my side, ...and become a believer." Thomas answered, "my Lord and my God".

Our reading today is quite challenging. And, I think I understand where poor Thomas is coming from – I understand his doubts – his reservations – he's sceptical.

In a broad sense, our reading today talks about renewal – an experience that has the power to carry us to a place beyond scepticism – beyond fear and doubt and locked doors. (Beyond simple answers.) And, in a way, that's what I want to talk to you about today. I want to talk about the experience of God that has the power to shape us in times of darkness – I want to talk about the gift of grace or renewal that can grow within us, even after our faith has been damaged. (This is the faith of Thomas.)

Thomas shows us that new belief and hope can often be born in a place of darkness and doubt (this is a wonderful message).

If nothing else, our reading today reminds us that belief is a gift from God. (God is always involved.) It can come to us in the form of a new understanding – or a new hope – or the recognition of the sacred (in our family or friends or work) that gives us the courage to live more fully. (In a sense, this is a summary of our Easter faith - resurrection.)

The example of Thomas reminds us that renewed belief is stronger than fear or doubt or even failure. And, yes, these experiences will change us – they can lead us to a new place (a new depth of understanding or a new appreciation of the sacred – when we talk about renewed faith the emphasis is on the word new.)

As a theological student, I was introduced to the writings of James Fowler, who talked about different stages of faith development in our lives. When talking about Conjunctive faith (stage 5), he talks about what happens when old assumptions break down (usually in middle age). He talks about a time of discovery when rational solutions that once seemed so elegant suddenly seem less appealing (he describes these old beliefs as a painted canvas that cover an intricate and intriguing cavern of surprising depth). This is a time when simple answers are no longer adequate. (This is what happens to Thomas.) And, for us - for human beings, this journey is part of our lives – it helps us to get out of bed in the morning and meet the challenges of the day. (hope).

In the days following the death of Jesus - their teacher and friend, the disciples were shattered. We're told that they were hiding in the shadows – hiding from the Jews behind locked doors. And, in a way, these locked doors reflected their own locked up hearts and minds.

The disciples were struggling to make sense of what they had experienced and they were filled with doubt and disbelief – questioning what they had been taught. It was a dark time. And, I can see the disciples huddled together in the darkness, feeling lost and alone.

And, in Thomas, we see this struggle very clearly – in Thomas, we see a man who has lost his faith – a man who has taken a hit. Thomas refuses to believe – he’s afraid to believe - because belief is risky.

This might sound familiar to some of you. (I can remember feeling something like this a couple of times over the years – and I suspect that I’m not alone.)

Our reading reminds us that the locked room is a terrible place – it’s a place where we can find ourselves struggling some very challenging thoughts and feelings – it’s a place where we can often feel cut off from those around us – or isolated in some way.

When we talk about the doubts of Thomas – I think we’re really talking about his loss of confidence. This is what happens when we no longer trust the path that we’ve chosen – when our priorities change. And, moving forward can be difficult. (Fowler describes this as a crisis of faith.)

Like Thomas, the locked room can be a place or a point in our lives when we feel stuck or uncertain. And, like Thomas, most of us find our way to this room at some point in our lives. (In fact, most of us will visit this place more than once.)

But our reading also reminds us that this room is a place where Christ can find us (this is our Gospel – our Good News) – the locked room is a place where we can find ourselves. It can be a place of discovery – it can be a place of renewal and new birth. Our reading today reminds us that the locked rooms in our lives open from the inside. (And, to begin again – to move forward from the locked room can be a wonderful experience – wonderful and unexpected. But, to do so, we’re often called to leave something behind – some part of ourselves that doesn’t fit anymore – an old assumption or a habit – or an old grudge or even something that we value.)

If the locked room is a metaphor for the struggle to find faith and meaning in our lives, the locked doors are the barriers that prevent us from growing into the fulness of this new life (Locked doors of grief or disappointment or anger or fear or regret or loss – whatever is holding us back).

And, of course, prayer is often the key. When we search for God in times of struggle – when we look for God in times of doubt and darkness, we acknowledge the seed of belief that still lives within us (hope).

During this season of Easter, we are again reminded that Easter will not be a time of resurrection and renewal for everyone – many will struggle quietly behind locked doors. And, I pray that these people will discover the grace of our loving God – a grace that comes to us in the locked up corners of our lives. I pray that, for all of us, Easter will be a time when belief is strengthened and our hearts are truly set free – a time of renewal and change and new life.

The Lord be with you.