



Revd Ro's Reflection on The Second Sunday of Easter

Year C 2022

Acts 5.27-32

John 20.19-31

We are told that Mary Magdalene went to the tomb early in the morning, 'while it was still dark.' It was in the half-light that she plumbed the depth of misery as she discovered the empty tomb and believed the body of Jesus had been taken away. Next came the glorious sunrise at the resurrection as her Lord spoke the word which turned her world around, 'Mary.' That was the moment of revelation, the moment of certainty, the moment of joy.

Now in this reading the light has changed again. ¹⁹ '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,' The scene has moved from darkness to bright light to the dimness of a locked room at evening. We can imagine the shadows cast by the tiny oil lamps flickering on the walls. The state of mind of the disciples is clearly stated, they were afraid. But there were other emotions too, Peter had denied Jesus; the rest had run away, there must have been awful feelings of guilt. Only the 'disciple Jesus loved' had stood at the foot of his cross with those loyal women. These apostles had plumbed the depths of misery and loss; they were bereft, 'What now?' must have been the question in their minds. However there was a huge but, into this mix of feelings something else had come. Mary had told them the tomb was empty. Peter and John have gone in and seen the empty tomb and the linen wrappings. They had returned home, their heads full of imaginings, where was Jesus? John we are told, 'believed' but just what he believed we are not told. The sentence which follows 'for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.' shows that they had not comprehended Jesus' teaching fully. Then Mary, who had waited at the tomb, runs to them with the earth shattering announcement. 'I have seen the Lord.' In Luke we are told that the disciples thought the women's story 'an idle tale.' The fact was that emotions were swirling around in their minds, could Mary's announcement really be true?

So we come into the upper room with the disciples, we watch in the dim light as they discuss the events of the last few days, look on as they huddle behind closed doors afraid for their lives. Of

course the fact that the doors were locked has a significance far beyond their desire to protect themselves from the Jews; it is of vital importance for what happens next, 'Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'

Jesus didn't knock to be let in; he is suddenly 'among them', an impossible thing for a human being to do! This is Jesus man and God. His first words are restorative. He knows the tumultuous emotions swirling around that room and so he says 'Peace be with you,' It is in part shalom, the traditional Jewish greeting. Actually the word shalom has a deep meaning in itself, it means to wish someone wholeness, wholeness of body, mind and spirit, exactly what the disciples need just now. But Jesus does not just wish them peace, he achieves it for the disciples. His words give the deep peace of Christ. It is the power of God and it calmed their fears and restored them. Just as his 'peace' had stilled the waters of the Sea of Galilee, so now it stills the tumult within each one of them it calms them and holds them safe. They must have been speechless with astonishment at seeing their Lord alive.

²⁰ 'After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.'

Jesus has just appeared with them, he has come through locked doors but this is a real body. He is no ghost. He shows the marks of the nails, he shows where the spear has pierced his side. Mary does not recognise him at first; the disciples on the road to Emmaus don't either. The disciples in the upper room do at once and Jesus wants them to, 'then they rejoiced when they saw the Lord.' They are amazed, shocked, he was dead, he suffered the vilest death the Romans could devise, he had been placed in the tomb but here he was alive before their eyes. Their shock must have been huge so Jesus says again, 'Peace be with you,' he needs to establish deep calm and wholeness.

Jesus strengthens them for the huge task they will face when he is no longer with them. He states their commission at once,

'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

That is the task; you are to continue the work my Father gave to me. Jesus passes on the huge responsibility, and with it the danger. They can only do this in the strength of God, so he breathes the Holy Spirit onto them. He fills their bodies with the strength God alone can give. In that moment they are whole again but oh so much more. To them he gives the ability to forgive sins in his name, that is God's name. Jesus knows these men intimately. He has seen their frailty, their fear. He entrusts the spreading of the gospel to them. When we feel down or unworthy or frail we need to go, in imagination, into that upper room, to look into the eyes of our Lord to hear him say 'Peace be with you' to each of us and to receive his commission which now is ours.

Thomas we are told wasn't with them.

²⁴ 'But Thomas (who was called the Twin) one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.

²⁵So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

That infamous comment has echoed down through history and earned him the tag, "Doubting Thomas." Poor old Thomas, it is at this point that we should stop and ask how we would react to that news. The disciples had heard the news of the resurrection but had not been sure until they had seen Jesus standing before them. Now Thomas, a realist, wants proof positive and that's his

mistake. Faith is about trust not proof. Jesus will build his church on faith, on trust in him. Thomas is showing himself to be fallible, but it is worth remembering when Jesus heard the news that his friend Lazarus was ill and he said,

‘Let us go to Judea again.’ The disciples said to him, ‘Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?’ But ¹⁶Thomas who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with him.’ (John 11)

Thomas was brave and willing to accompany Jesus into danger, but the man of action just cannot accept in faith. His words to the disciples on that first Easter evening will return to haunt him, ‘But he said to them, ‘Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.’

How ashamed he must have been when his very words are repeated to him by Jesus. Jesus was not there to hear that exclamation but he knew all about it. Jesus is the omnipresent God, of course he knows. The following week, Thomas is there and the scene is repeated. Jesus’ greeting of deep peace, brings stillness to their souls.

²⁶ ‘A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ ²⁷Then he said to Thomas ‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.

Jesus searches our hearts and knows everyone of us intimately. He knew Thomas’ character. He knew the man intimately; Jesus knew his actions and words to Thomas now, just as his words later to Peter at the lakeside, would restore him. As Jesus stood there with his arms outstretched I believe, that part of the gesture was the open arms of love. How deeply ashamed Thomas must have been then, but his reaction was instantaneous.

²⁸ ‘Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’

Jesus looks into the eyes of Thomas, as he had looked into the eyes of Peter at the denial and that look is of forgiveness. Thomas has warranted a ticking off and he gets it, but Thomas’ reaction is wholehearted acceptance of who Jesus is. Jesus’ words are also a message to believers down the ages who turn to him as Lord and God.

‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’

Jesus is alive again, on this fact hinges our faith. Only God can vanquish death, as John concludes in this passage.

³⁰ ‘Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But 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.’

Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Jesus at Calvary broke the power of sin and restored us. At the resurrection he broke the power of death and won for us eternal life.

I only want to say a few words about our New Testament reading from Acts. To begin with, go back to the beginning of the gospel reading and the words.

‘and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews,’

Since then the risen Jesus has been seen on many occasions by the disciples and others. Since then Peter has been restored by the lakeside. The power from on high, the Holy Spirit, has come upon

them at Pentecost. God is with them. They are acting in the strength of God and what a transformation. These men are scarcely recognisable as those men on that Easter Eve who huddled behind locked doors. There is no more 'fear of the Jews.' We are told in Acts 5 how the disciples are proclaiming the risen Christ in the Temple the epicentre of the Jewish faith. The new way has superseded the old because Jesus is the fulfilment of the scriptures. The authorities can't allow that. It means they are guilty. The high priest acts quickly,

¹⁷ 'Then the high priest took action; he and all who were with him (that is, the sect of the Sadducees), being filled with jealousy, ¹⁸arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison.'

However God has other plans and there follows the miraculous escape from prison. The elders send for them and though the doors are locked and the guards in place the apostles are teaching in the Temple. Here they are at the very hub of Jewish religion, the dwelling of God preaching the good news of Jesus Christ and fearlessly flying in the face of authority. If what they say is true then the priests and religious leaders are not just misleading the people they have had the Messiah killed!

²⁶'Then the captain went with the temple police and brought them, but without violence, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people.'

It is interesting that the Temple police go quietly to fetch them to the council just as they had arrested Jesus by night because they are afraid of the people's reaction. The religious rulers care nothing for the people, only their own power, as we have seen they are driven by 'jealousy and spite.' How strong those emotions are in this world and what damage they do in human beings.

²⁷ 'When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, ²⁸saying, 'We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us.'

What Peter answers is a challenge to us all.

²⁹ 'But Peter and the apostles answered, 'We must obey God rather than any human authority.'

We have to answer this question every day and we cannot compromise. The way of God must be our guide and if we know something is wrong we must stand against it. Human authority pales before the authority of God. As Christians we must follow the way of Christ, we must ask the question, 'What would Jesus do'? That is our guide.

Peter and the apostles stand up against the very council who had handed Jesus over to the Romans, who had delivered him to death. What courage they have, they have received their commission from the risen Christ and are fulfilling it despite all danger. The facts are plain and Peter is not afraid to voice them.

³⁰ 'The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. ³¹God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour, so that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.'

Peter challenges these men with the truth. You killed Jesus, the Christ, the long awaited Messiah. You thought that was the end but it was not. Jesus is the fulfilment of the scriptures, he is God's chosen one, the one promised from of old. And so God, the God you are supposed to represent, raised him from the dead. There is no argument. We saw him, we heard him. He is alive. You have killed God's Messiah but Jesus is stronger than death. You have betrayed the God you purport to follow. Jesus has won life for us and forgiveness of sins and you are murderers.

That takes courage. Peter speaks the truth and risks death. That is the power of God working within him. The apostles have been transformed by the risen Jesus. As far as the council is concerned those

words have sealed their fate – they want them dead. It is Gamaliel, a member of the council and a very famous rabbi who says this,

‘let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; ³⁹but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!’

How true his words are. God is all powerful. The power that transformed the apostles Jesus promises to all who follow him. Jesus says to Thomas, 'blessed are those who believe but have not seen.' Those words echo down history to us and beyond. This is the Jesus who turns lives around and restores people to fullness of life. He has won for us the promises of God through his self-giving love. We are called to walk in his way and to share his love with others.

‘On the third morn he rose again, glorious in majesty to reign.’ F Pott

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