

The Avenue Uniting Church

Sunday 7th April, 2024

"Peace be with you... believe"



Listening for Sacred Wisdom

John 20:19-31

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, Jesus came and stood among them and said, *'Peace be with you.'* After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, *'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'*

When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, *'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'*

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

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.'*

Then 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.'*

Thomas answered him, *'My Lord and my GOD!'* Jesus said to him, *'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'*

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

'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'

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There's the vision statement for the new community of Jesus' people.

All done without the aid of butchers' paper, whiteboard, or even a powerpoint presentation!

This is a really important part of John's story of Jesus, because this is where the mission of GOD shifts from being the work of Jesus to being the work of his followers. This is where the focus of his little group shifts from inward to outward. That will be reflected in the name that ends up being given to them: "the ek lesia" (*'the people called out'*).

Or, as we say it in English, "*the church*".

According to John's gospel, this little community of women and men received their vision statement from the risen Christ. This is kind of John's equivalent of "The Great Commission" from the end of Matthew's gospel

"As the father sent me..." Pretty clear, really. My calling, the way of love, in GOD's name, is now your calling. And how will people identify them as his followers? *"If you have love, one for another"*. (John 13:34-5)

“Receive the Holy Spirit”. Not for its own sake, but to forgive the sins of others. If we don’t, who will?

Underlying all this, is the blessing John records twice: *“peace be with you”*.
The people who bear Jesus’ name, will echo his blessing to the world: “Peace be with you”!

Let’s sit with that for a bit.

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And then there’s Thomas: the man with an adjective for a first name!

We rarely hear Thomas mentioned without the word *“doubting”* in front of his name, do we? But you won’t hear it from me. For me, Thomas is *“the one who came to believe”*.

Thomas plays a particular role in John’s story of Jesus, and this little snippet of his story is there for a reason. John’s gospel is all about convincing his audience of the truth of his claims **about** Jesus, yes, but even more on calling them to believe **in** Jesus and the way of resurrection.

Thomas is the voice that says *“Hold on a minute, this is BIG!”* It’s the voice that brings sharp focus into John’s narrative, the one that won’t simply go with the flow: the voice that enables the writer to call people more deeply into transformation.

As John tells it, Thomas was the one who was prepared to name his doubts. He was unwilling to take it at face value when his friends said to him *“We have seen the Lord”*, but just think for a moment about what was at stake for him.

Who among us hasn’t felt the grief of hopes dashed?  
Who among us hasn’t desperately wanted something to be true, but said to ourselves *“Be sensible, things like that don’t happen to me”*?

Remember too, though, how Thomas named what it would take for him to believe, and that’s where Jesus the Christ meets him in John’s story. *“Thomas, feel my hands and side; don’t doubt any more, believe”*. **And Thomas responds: “My Lord, and my GOD!”**.

We’ll note he doesn’t simply say *“Oh, ok, well that is interesting! Thanks very much, Jesus, I can see now that what the others were saying was accurate.”*. No. *“My Lord and my GOD”*.

**Transformation for Thomas isn’t simply about a new doctrinal statement or creed, not about getting the facts straight.**

It’s about a wholehearted commitment to a new truth, that in Jesus’ way he has found the purpose and relationship that will give the rest of his life its heart and soul.

I was going to preface what comes next by saying how most of us may not have had such dramatic moments of transformation as those of Peter, Thomas and all the others.  
But I realised that that’s not right. I don’t know all your stories, but I’m pretty sure that each of us has had moments as profound and dramatic as theirs in your life and faith walk. And as I think about it, I know that I have!

Circumstances may have been a little less dramatic, but as I look back at my moments of “aha”, of the penny dropping, of transformation through new experiences, they have been every bit as profound - for me - as those of Peter and Mary and Thomas, and all of the rest.  
They have been experiences that have opened my eyes, ears, heart, mind, soul - whatever - to the truth of resurrection and life.

That may sound pretentious. I’ll live with that, but it’s not meant to be. I am slowly discovering that the profound moments of my life matter as much as the profound moments of other people’s lives.  
I would encourage you to make the same discovery if you haven’t already.

They are GOD-moments which shape who we are and who we become, as followers of Jesus. It’s too easy to be embarrassed by them, or think we’re getting above ourselves.

A better response is to humbly embrace our profound GOD moments as a gift, and enter into them. And then allow them to lead us forward in practising resurrection.

Such moments can be vital to the courage, hope and creative energy that we need on this path of discipleship. The path not always easy, we know that. Sometimes it's way beyond difficult! But we believe that it's the path of life, and so anything that helps us to walk it well is good.

Such moments can take us beyond "***believing that...***" (as important as that is), and more deeply into the way of "***believing in...***"

Thomas, in this moment with the risen Christ, staked his whole life on a new way of living, a new relationship with GOD, a new sense of purpose to his life. The event we call "Easter" turned out to be much more than a 'big weekend'. It turned out to be a life changer!

I believe our calling as church is to allow ourselves to be renewed by the ongoing truth of Easter, and by its ongoing life. At risk of sounding flippant, wouldn't be good if we were still talking about Easter, and practising resurrection, even after the shops are full of Christmas stuff. (in September!)

May it be so, and may GOD's spirit bless us with new life and truths, every day. AMEN