

# **Sermon on Sunday 24 April 2022 on ZOOM by Melanie Seward, Lay Reader**

(Reading: John 20.19 – end)

## **Seeking and trusting**



A story about experiencing amazing joy or a story about an event that is life-changing often loses something in the telling.

This week, I heard an episode of the series 'Life Changing' on Radio 4. It was an interview with Sinead Brown, who spent her childhood in over 15 different settings (either care homes or foster placements). It was a story of triumph over adversity; a love of reading, a supportive teacher, a tenacious student, academic achievement and a career in law, but running through the journey was also a life-threatening eating disorder, imposter syndrome and a distinct lack of peace within herself.

She left practising law to travel and, in New Zealand, one lunch changed her life. Listening to Sinead speak, I found it hard to understand how one lunch could give her the dignity and community that she had always needed.

Today we are thinking about Thomas, one of Jesus's close band of followers, and the moment that was his life-changing experience. It's after the crucifixion. Hiding behind closed doors, the disciples are grief-stricken and directionless. Then Jesus appears to them, but Thomas is absent. He will believe when he has seen Jesus.

How do we imagine Thomas? As highly sceptical of the account of the others? As doubting that they were in their right minds? As not accepting that Jesus could rise from the dead? As almost deriding his fellows and saying, 'Listen, I'm the one making sense here'? Think about his tone, volume, speed of words and eye movement. How does Thomas say the words: '*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.*'?

Then, when Jesus appears to Thomas, where and how is he standing? Is he a little stand-offish or right next to Jesus? Assertive or pensive? Full of doubt or full of awe and love?

There is another way to read this passage. Thomas has been on the journey with Jesus like all the other disciples, John's Gospel portrays him as a figure who takes a full part in trying to understand what it all means. In chapter 4, Jesus tells the disciples that he will leave them, but that they know the Way,

and it is Thomas that feels able to say, 'Wait a minute, Jesus, no we don't, what 'way' are you talking about?' He wants to know. He cares. With the other disciples, he listens to Jesus explain that the time for him to leave is coming but the Spirit of Truth will be given to them and guide them in all that they do (chapters 14, 15 and 16).

This is the same person who is not in the room when Jesus seeks out and finds his disciples; when in John's Gospel they receive the Spirit of Truth and are given Jesus's peace. It would be surprising if Thomas did not feel left out, bereft, abandoned, left wanting or needing to have this amazing experience for himself.

Jesus's words are, '*Do not be unbelieving but believing*'. The word 'doubt' in the original Greek is not in the Gospel. Rather than thinking of 'doubting Thomas', picture Thomas as being just like Mary Magdalene and the rest of them – locked in fear, desperately wanting to experience the Risen Jesus, receive his peace and the guiding Spirit.

Jesus offers Thomas his body, but we don't know if Thomas touched the wounds left by the nails or placed his hand in the wound in his side. We do, though, know Thomas's response: '*My Lord and my God!*' No one introduces Jesus as this; Jesus does not ask Thomas whether he believes he is Lord and God. This is Thomas's personal conviction; his response is deep-felt and whole-hearted. He sees clearly that the Word did become Flesh - Jesus is the Son of God, crucified and risen from the dead.

So, what of us, as we sit and contemplate John's account of this life-changing event....

With which version of Thomas do we identify? The so-called 'Doubting Thomas'? Or the one who may well have put out two hands to grasp not just the body of Jesus Christ but to accept Christ's peace, the Spirit's guidance and the gift of everlasting life?

Are we, or have we been, like the disciples, in our own locked room or mind, when our heart is closed or unable or not ready to receive these gifts that Jesus offers us? Inside, deep down, can we get in touch with the need and desire for God's love and reach out? Because, if we can reach out, Christ is seeking us.

Remember, the disciples were at a time when they were in fear of being arrested, of losing everything, of not having a clue about what the future held - and yet they were given peace.

May we be open to receive Christ's peace in our own enclosed spaces and to share our story. We may not see the Risen Jesus as Thomas saw him, literally with wounds - however, to see is to perceive. And when we are fearful, uncertain and find it too difficult to understand what this means for our lives, let us be as Thomas - simply desiring to reach out and discover in the faith that Jesus is seeking us.