

St. Mary Magdalen, Oxford,

2nd Sunday of Easter 2020

Mthr Judith Brown

John 20:19-31

The gospel for this Sunday, the first after Easter (“Low Sunday”) is taken from the gospel which bears the name of John. It recounts two occasions on successive weeks, ‘on the first day of the week’, when the disciples were gathered together after receiving the astonishing account from Mary Magdalen: “I have seen the Lord.” The writer underlines how fearful they all were, to the extent of locking the doors of the room where they had gathered. And Jesus appears to them all. He shows them his wounded hands and side to make it abundantly plain that he is who he is, no ghost or spirit but the one who was crucified and now lives. And, echoing his final teaching to them before his death (particularly John 14), he not only comes to them but also offers them peace and breathes upon them so that the Holy Spirit may enter and empower them for the ministry with which he is entrusting them.

But one of the twelve was not there – Thomas. On hearing the testimony of the others he says he will not believe what they have told him – their reiteration of Mary’s insistence that they too had seen the Lord – unless he too sees and touches the wounds.

We know little about Thomas except that he is portrayed in John’s gospel as a down-to-earth sort of chap, even truculent, prepared to argue the toss (John 14: 5), but courageous in following Jesus into danger (John 11: 16). Tradition has it that after the Resurrection he travelled to India to preach

the gospel and was martyred there. He is often called the apostle to the Indies and is the patron saint of India. Whatever the historical accuracy of this there is certainly a very ancient Christian community in southern India whose origins probably predate the coming of the faith to our own islands. Known as Syrian or Saint Thomas Christians, they remain a highly respected and distinctive part of local society, worshipping in the ancient liturgical language of Syriac.

For the gospel writer the personal encounter with the risen Christ, which happens a week after the other disciples had seen Him, serves an immensely important purpose in the gospel. As with so many of the reported encounters of Christ with individuals, they serve to illuminate the identity and significance of Jesus. The woman of Samaria at the well, Nicodemus coming by night to see Jesus, Mary Magdalen pouring out the precious ointment over Jesus at the supper to celebrate the raising of Lazarus, and now Thomas: all these personal encounters tell us something about who Jesus is. Thomas encounters Jesus a week after the rest, in the same place where the doors are shut. Jesus again appears and greets them with peace and the particularly speaks to Thomas, inviting him to touch the wounds in his body. Thomas's response is "My Lord and my God". Through his words the gospel writer is making an ultimate claim for the identity of Christ, echoing the Prologue to the gospel: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." (John 1: 14)

Thomas is often rather unkindly – and inaccurately – called "doubting Thomas". The story of his encounter with Christ tells us not so much about his doubt but about his faith – and how he is the pattern for our

faith. He shows us that faith is not about accepting what other people have told you, but about encountering the risen Christ. It is not, at its core, acceptance of a group of theological propositions, commitment to a system of beliefs, or following particular spiritual disciplines and patterns of worship. It is encountering the risen Christ and growing in trust for Him as the way we see the nature of God, the very Word of God himself.

But how do we encounter the risen Christ? Clear we cannot see him in any simple, physical way as Thomas did. But we meet him, through his grace, in many different ways. Few of us are likely to experience what Paul did on the road to Damascus. Our occasions for meeting the Lord will probably be quieter, infinitely varied, and often impossible to describe. He comes to us in the love and ministry of other people, in words, both Biblical and more modern, in music, art and nature, and supremely in the sacraments. (It is good to remember in this time of pandemic and “lockdown” that grace is never locked down. God pours out grace and mercy on us in so many different ways even when we are physically deprived of the sacraments.) We may stretch out to touch him, often hesitantly: but he is always there before us, reaching out to touch us, showing us his hands and his side. That encounter has to be renewed many, many times through our lives for only thus shall we find in Him our Way, our Light, our Good Shepherd, Bread for our Journey.

But there is something else which the story of Thomas can help us with. Many Christians are ashamed that they often feel doubt. But faith and doubt are not opposites. They are bedfellows. Could it be otherwise? God is mysterious and beyond all ordinary human knowing. We cannot encapsulate Him in any formula or dogma or image. (Remember C.S. Lewis’s Aslan – no tame lion.) Faith has to work through moments of

illumination and times of deep darkness. But the darkness is holy and perhaps protective, shielding our limited capacity to see. As our 17th century poet Henry Vaughan wrote, in “The Night”, meditating on the story of Nicodemus, who came to see Jesus at night:

**There is in God, some say,
A deep but dazzling darkness, as men here
Say it is late and dusky, because they
See not all clear.
O for that night! where I in Him
Might live invisible and dim!**

Amen.