

Nottingham North East Circuit

Written home worship for Sunday 14th April 2024 produced by Rev John Wiseman

Let's begin by singing / reading a hymn that
picks up on the hope of Easter, sung to the
tune 'God is love let heaven adore him'

This is STF 296

Christ has risen while earth slumbers,
Christ has risen where hope died,
as he said and as he promised,
as we doubted and denied.
Let the moon embrace the blessing;
let the sun sustain the cheer;
let the world confirm the rumour.
Christ is risen, God is here!

Christ has risen for the people
whom he loved and died to save;
Christ has risen for the women
bringing flowers to grace his grave
Christ has risen for disciples
huddled in an upstairs room.
He whose word inspired creation
is not silenced by the tomb.

Christ has risen to companion
former friends who fear the night,
sensing loss and limitation
where their faith had once burned bright.
They bemoan what is no longer,
they expect no hopeful sign
till Christ ends their conversation,
breaking bread and sharing wine.

Christ has risen and forever
lives to challenge and to change
all whose lives are messed or mangled,
all who find religion strange.
Christ is risen. Christ is present
making us what he has been –
evidence of transformation
in which God is known and seen.

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For our opening prayer I am going to invite you
to read from your bibles **Psalm 118**

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his love endures forever.
² Let Israel say:
"His love endures forever."
³ Let the house of Aaron say:
"His love endures forever."
⁴ Let those who fear the LORD say:
"His love endures forever."
⁵ When hard pressed, I cried to the LORD;
he brought me into a spacious place.
⁶ The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid.
What can mere mortals do to me?
⁷ The LORD is with me; he is my helper.
I look in triumph on my enemies.
⁸ It is better to take refuge in the LORD
than to trust in humans.
⁹ It is better to take refuge in the LORD
than to trust in princes.
¹⁰ All the nations surrounded me,
but in the name of the LORD I cut them down.
¹¹ They surrounded me on every side,
but in the name of the LORD I cut them down.
¹² They swarmed around me like bees,
but they were consumed as quickly as
burning thorns;
in the name of the LORD I cut them down.
¹³ I was pushed back and about to fall,
but the LORD helped me.
¹⁴ The LORD is my strength and my defense^[a];
he has become my salvation.
¹⁵ Shouts of joy and victory
resound in the tents of the righteous:
"The LORD's right hand has done mighty things!
¹⁶ The LORD's right hand is lifted high;
the LORD's right hand has done mighty
things!"
¹⁷ I will not die but live,
and will proclaim what the LORD has done.
¹⁸ The LORD has chastened me severely,
but he has not given me over to death.
¹⁹ Open for me the gates of the righteous;
I will enter and give thanks to the LORD.
²⁰ This is the gate of the LORD
through which the righteous may enter.
²¹ I will give you thanks, for you answered me;
you have become my salvation.
²² The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;

²³ the LORD has done this,
and it is marvelous in our eyes.
²⁴ The LORD has done it this very day;
let us rejoice today and be glad.
²⁵ LORD, save us!
LORD, grant us success!
²⁶ Blessed is he who comes in the name of
the LORD.
From the house of the LORD we bless you.^[b]
²⁷ The LORD is God,
and he has made his light shine on us.
With boughs in hand, join in the festal
procession
up^[c] to the horns of the altar.
²⁸ You are my God, and I will praise you;
you are my God, and I will exalt you.
²⁹ Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his love endures forever.

Today's bible passage 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.'²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.²¹ Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

Jesus and Thomas

²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin^[a]), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.²⁵ 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.'

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.'²⁷ 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.'²⁸ Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' ²⁹ 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.'

The Purpose of This Book

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹ But these are written so that you may come to believe^[b] that Jesus is the Messiah,^[c] the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Today's Message

I wonder if you have ever had the misfortune to say or do something and that moment, that incident is all the people remember you for.

Back in the 1968 Rugby league Challenge cup final between Leeds and Wakefield, in front of almost 90,000 people Don Fox had what seemed an unmissable chance to win the game for Wakefield with a conversion attempt slap bang in front of the posts in the very last minute of the game.

As history has recorded since that moment in time, Fox somehow managed to miss the kick thus giving Leeds an 11-10 point victory. What is ironic is that just a few minutes before that incredible miss, Don Fox has been named man of the match. And despite a stellar career in the game that saw him represent England and Great Britain Don Fox will always be remembered for that one single miss

Now if Don Fox ever needed to find a sympathetic ear, a shoulder to cry on, a someone who has been there, done that got the T shirt he would certainly find an ally in one of Jesus inner ring of disciples, namely Thomas

Thomas is known to everyone as doubting based it appears on one single incident. And yet at the start let's be clear the word doubt never ever appears in the text you have just heard...certainly not in the original Greek anyway. One moment of hesitation and he is labeled in scripture as the one who doubted. Doubting Thomas. It cast him in a rather unfortunate light.

Imagine what we would have thought of Peter if the last thing associated with him would have been his denial. Or if Mark had been nicknamed...the one who ran away naked.

Doubting is an unfortunate way to remember Thomas. But I wonder how do we remember him, the man who reportedly travelled all the way to India to set up the church there

What exactly do we know of Thomas from the gospels or should that read gospel for apart from a list containing the disciples names he is only ever mentioned in John's.

We first encounter Thomas in John's Gospel, when Jesus hears the news about the death of his friend Lazarus (John 11:16) it is Thomas insists that the disciples accompany Jesus when he goes to Bethany, a place he'd had just had to leave under threat of being stoned. It is Thomas who supports Jesus' apparently suicidal plan with, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Later in the midst of Jesus' long farewell discourse, Thomas speaks up, cutting through Jesus' mystical, poetic and downright baffling language. Jesus assures his followers, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places Where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going," And its Thomas who replies, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" (John 14:5).. He wants to understand what's going on, and be able to face the situation at hand.

Thomas is plainspoken and gutsy. Thomas is a practical, concrete sort of guy. If Thomas doesn't know or understand something he simply says so.

So we arrive at that first Easter evening when the other disciples are hiding in the upper room. Where is Thomas? The answer is not clear. Perhaps Thomas' pain is simply too great. Maybe Thomas's faith has taken such a battering following the crucifixion and death of Jesus that he has separated himself from the community? Is Thomas so hurt he does not feel he can be with the rest of the disciples, or why perhaps did they not ensure he was there, for after all a trouble shared is a trouble halved etc.

Unfortunately it is often when we most need it, that we keep away from those who can offer support. The writer of the Book of Hebrews makes it clear that we should not forsake the assembling of ourselves together. The first step toward making any situation worse is to make yourself absent from the people of God.

Or perhaps there is another reason for Thomas's absence. Mary Magdalene has already told the other disciples on that first Easter morning that she has seen the risen Jesus, this presumably includes Thomas. And let's not forget their reaction as recorded in the gospels

Only let's pause...has she told the other disciples? Well not in Mark's account or certainly not in what most scholars think is the original ending because at 16:8...the women run away terrified, and we are told they do not tell anyone

In Matthew...Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted

In Luke...they did not believe the women because their words were like nonsense

Thomas is not the only one who has doubts...they all do.

So back to why Thomas is not there. Maybe Thomas has taken the initiative for himself, perhaps he is out looking for Jesus, searching the locations where he thinks Jesus might appear, trying to find out the truth.

Or maybe he is the only disciple with enough sense to recognize that this hiding thing could take a long time, and that he'd better go out and get food and supplies for the group.

When the disciples tell Thomas they have seen Jesus with their own eyes, he answers, "Unless I see the mark of the nails -- in fact, until I touch those marks and put my hand in the wound in his side..." responding out of his practical, concrete nature.

Thomas wants to make sure. What if this is some mistake, a delusion born of desperate hope, an apparition? For it seems that Mary's experience of meeting Jesus in the garden cannot keep the disciples from hiding themselves in a room. Thomas is no more of a doubter than the other disciples, than most of us. He has to have an experience 1st hand...if you'll pardon the pun

During his appearance on that first Easter morning Jesus has appeared to Mary Magdalene in the garden. He has spoken to her and she in return has physically held him, touched him. Later that evening, Jesus has shown his hands, feet and side to the gathered disciples.

Thomas is simply asking for the same assurance that the others have had. And the fact that he goes a step beyond, demanding to touch Jesus' wounds, well perhaps that is just Thomas's way of verifying that this is the crucified Jesus and not an illusion or a ghost. Thomas wants proof. He wants to experience the physicality, the presence, the power of the risen Jesus himself

And so a week after his initial appearance Jesus again appears to his disciples in the closed room, once again not appearing to require an open door.

And again despite seeing and acknowledging that he is risen they still appear to be afraid, in hiding. And this time Thomas is there. And far from rebuking Thomas for his demands, Jesus offers to meet his conditions. It appears that reasonable doubts don't disqualify us from discipleship, addressed and affirmed by risen Christ

"Put your fingers in my hands, touch my side."
Says Jesus.

Jesus invites Thomas to touch him, offer physical proof. In contrast to Mary was not allowed to cling on to Jesus for fear of clinging onto her old way of life, here Thomas is invited to touch so that his life can move on.

The Gospel story gives no report of Thomas following through with these gruesome actions, and I don't believe he felt any need to do so. But the personal encounter makes Jesus' resurrection real to this follower.

Thomas has to make this personal connection with Jesus for himself. We all come to faith to belief in different way, all of us unique. Even the 1st followers

- The disciple whom Jesus loved from seeing the empty grave and folded clothes
- Mary from hearing her name spoken by a man she thinks is the gardener
- Cleopas and his friend when they see the stranger who has accompanied them on the road to Emmaus bless and break bread
- The disciples from seeing Jesus on that first Easter evening in their way

The disciple whom Jesus loved cannot experience Jesus for Mary

Mary can't experience the resurrected Jesus for the disciples

The disciples hiding in that room can't experience Jesus for Thomas.

Only Thomas can experience Jesus for Thomas.

It is only after one's own experience of Jesus that one believes. It has to be this personal encounter

You cannot have my faith, and I cannot have yours. We each have our own.

To me Thomas simply wants what the others have already had...a personal encounter...would we have believed if we had not been there.

Indeed how often are we actually present and see something right before our eyes and in the words of one Victor Meldrew exclaim...I don't bloody believe it

The theme of not believing or doubting is not just a problem confined to Thomas but one common to all of us 2,000 years later. We all live with doubts...doubts about the society we live in, doubts about our security, doubts about the economy, doubts about the future, even doubts about God and our faith... can we really be forgiven, does God accept us just as we are, are we good enough?

The answer is of course yes we are.... ...but as I have often said although God loves us just as we are, God loves us too much to allow us to stay just as we are

Doubt is I believe...did you see what I did there, doubt is an essential part of our pilgrimage. The opposite of doubt is of course certainty and yet what we walk by is faith....and there are times when that faith will be stretched, challenged, caused to change, to grow to develop. Such doubts can lead to questions, to explorations, to deeper, better, more informed understandings about God, our relationship with God and with each other

Just like Mary Magdalene, just like the disciples, just like the two on the road to

Emmaus and just like Thomas we need to have that one to one encounter with the risen Christ, that personal intimate experience with Jesus, that life changing moment...not when all our doubts and questions are removed, but the moment when we take that leap of faith and truly start to believe.

Believe that even though we cannot see the wounds on the hands, feet and side of Jesus, we believe that they were suffered for us....for you and for me

It is then and perhaps only then that we can share with doubting Thomas in what is without doubt the most wonderful declaration of faith as we meet the risen Jesus in our hearts and in our lives with just a single phrase on our lips, one that doubting Thomas is the first to recognize and to declare for the world to hear.

“my Lord and my God”

Amen

Let's sing again, a new hymn by one of my favourite writers, Carolyn Winfrey Gillette. We are going to sing / read this to the tune 'The churches one foundation'
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When Thomas heard from Jesus,
"Now come and follow me,"
He surely went with gladness,
for there was much to see.
He witnessed Jesus' teaching
and saw his healing touch;
He found a faith to guide him,
a friend he loved so much.

When Jesus spoke of heaven,
bold Thomas dared to say,
"We don't know where you're going!
How can we know the way?"
He wanted understanding
of what he could not see.
Then Jesus reassured him,
"The way is here — through me."

When crowds began to murmur
and leaders raised their cry,
Brave Thomas spoke out firmly,
"Let's go with him and die."
He ate at Jesus' table,
partaking wine and bread;
Yet later with the others,
he saw the cross and fled.

What joy on Easter evening
when many saw the Lord!
Yet Thomas was not with them
and would not trust their word.
When Christ appeared before him,
his doubts were quickly gone;
He gladly knew that evening
the joy of Easter dawn.

That man of faith saw Jesus
at breakfast by the sea;
At Pentecost he witnessed
so others would believe.
O Lord, may we — like Thomas — keep
growing day by day;
Increase our faith and guide us,
for Lord, you are the Way.

Prayers of intercession

Today I am going to invite you to think of the stories that have dominated our news bulletins over the past week. Think of the things you have had conversations about this week. Think of the people you are concerned about.....and simply pray for those things, situations and people.

Hymn - Let's bring this time of worship together with a familiar favourite

Give me the faith which can remove
And sink the mountain to a plain;
Give me the childlike praying love,
Which longs to build thy house again;
Thy love, let it my heart o'er-power,
And all my simple soul devour.

I would the precious time redeem,
And longer live for this along,
To spend and to be spent for them
Who have not yet my Savior known;
Fully on these my mission prove,
And only breathe, to breathe thy love.

My talents, gifts, and graces, Lord,
Into thy blessed hands receive;
And let me live to preach thy word,
And let me to thy glory live;
My every sacred moment spend
In publishing the sinner's Friend.

Enlarge, inflame, and fill my heart
With boundless charity divine,
So shall I all my strength exert,
And love them with a zeal like thine,
And lead them to thy open side,
The sheep for whom the Shepherd died