

## Easter 2 Our Essential Faith in Changed Circumstances

March 2020 (Covid time)

### John 20:19-31 (ESV)

#### *Jesus Appears to the Disciples*

<sup>19</sup> On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." <sup>20</sup> When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." <sup>22</sup> And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."

#### *Jesus and Thomas*

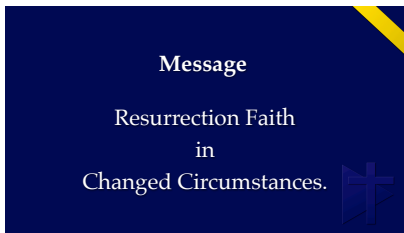
<sup>24</sup> Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup> So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."

<sup>26</sup> Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." <sup>27</sup> Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." <sup>28</sup> Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" <sup>29</sup> Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

#### *The Purpose of This Book*

<sup>30</sup> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; <sup>31</sup> but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

### Introduction.



Last week we began to celebrate the Resurrection in circumstances we have never faced before.

It's as if all the centuries of tradition and richness of experience have been reduced to what can be presented and shared on a computer device.

Does God work with this? I hope so.

One curious image from last week was Pope Francis and a few people celebrating Easter with a communion service in the vast emptiness of St Peter's in the Vatican. He was fully robed and attired as usual speaking to a microphone in an empty venue but could be seen and heard around the world. We are turning a corner and I wonder which way we will face at the end of this?

I have a few questions for this time:

**Q1** So what does faith in the Resurrection call from us while in pandemic lockdown?

**Q2** And what might we consider being and doing differently afterwards the lockdown?

**A** My simple expectation for the near future is: more Lent.

Lent is normally the 6 weeks before Easter.

This year I expect it could be more like 12 weeks with Easter in the middle.

Let me give a comparison:

In the middle of New Zealand's North Island lies Lake Taupo. It was formed around 230 AD when a volcano totally exploded creating a massive basin that filled with water. It was one of those eruptions in the history of the world that changed the climate for some time. We get some idea of how dramatic this was from Chinese weather records that there was no summer that year.

Can you imagine that? No summer?

**Q** How do you survive that?

**A** You support what is essential and you let go what is not.

I want to take hold of this extended Lent wrapped around the resurrection to press into what is essential and let go of what is not.

It's more opportunity for Believe and Repent. Be rightly focused in faith and let go of distractions

### **Text**

To take us there let's join Thomas -disciple of the Lord- with the others a few hours after the first Resurrection appearances were reported. They were literally in lockdown, afraid and stressed. Thomas missed the first resurrection appearance and cannot believe what he is told so he says:



“Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.”

There is something so good and genuine about the stance Thomas takes here.

He will only believe what is true.

Being in lockdown was no reason to go soft in the head.

This was not yet a scientific age but Thomas had the basic idea.

He would only actively believe what he was convinced of as a true account of reality.

His instruments for determining what was real were his eyes and his hands.

The reality he knew -perhaps from personal observation- was the crucified body of Jesus pierced by nails and a spear. For Jesus to be raised, his body had to bear the marks of this distinctive trauma.

That is what faith in any form of resurrection required: evidence for continuity between life, death and resurrection. For it to be true of Jesus those features to be manifestly evident.

Eight days later they were still in lockdown he got to see those specific features and was totally convinced that the accounts he had been given were really true.

Bravo Thomas for demonstrating the importance of the Resurrection account being totally true!

Because without it nothing of real transforming hope can be said, claimed or offered.

Thank you Thomas and sorry you were given the doubting label. Take no notice of it!

How people get to that point of believing the Resurrection is true is diverse.

Thomas got to see and touch up close.

Many people meet the risen Lord directly in various ways such as dreams, visions, a sudden awareness etc and others are convinced by the abundant circumstantial evidence while others simply arrive at a quiet confidence that it's really true. The Lord is Risen!

Jesus' comment on this to Thomas and others there on the day was:

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

So Jesus knew others would come to believe in his resurrection through evidences other than direct observation.

Big statement Thomas illustrates:

**The only valid reason to believe is because it is really true. (*Echt waar*)**

So going on from there the solid healthy Christian will have a faith that sits squarely on the resurrection. The whole New Testament pulses with this. William and Gloria Gaither put it this way in a great verse we may know:

*Because He lives I can face tomorrow  
Because He lives all fear is gone  
Because I know He holds the future  
And life is worth the living just because He lives*

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I would hope that everyone is with me so far? Amen?

### **Application**

So to getting practical: I have 2 questions:

- A. Are you based squarely on the resurrection of Jesus?
  - a. Is that central or optional?
- B. How are we living that as church on-line?

I am not saying the Resurrection is all there is to the Christian Faith but I am saying that it's the truth that needs to be central and foundational. Resurrection is of course unique to the Christian Gospel. Without it we do not have much.

**If we are an Easter people singing 'Hallelujah' it's because the Resurrection is pivotal.**

St Paul learned this the hard way!

Some people get the truth easy while others -usually males of the species- need to be severely impacted for the truth to land. That happened for St Paul when he was on his way to round up and imprison Jewish Christians in Damascus. All was going to plan until he was blinded by light and made level with the ground so he would appreciate the words he heard next:

“Saul, Saul, Why do you persecute me?”<sup>1</sup>

To which Saul replied,

“Who are you, Lord?” And he heard, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

The connection Saul made became the pivot point of Paul's ministry and message.

The Risen Jesus identifies with his Church. In this case, the very people Saul was persecuting.

Therefore:

- Persecute the Church and you persecute Jesus, crucified and risen.
- Love the Church and you love the living Jesus.
- Serve the Church, even the least of them, and you serve Jesus.
- Feed the Church and you feed Jesus.

**Q** If Jesus is so keen on identifying himself with his church might we not expect to recognise that? I would expect that to be easier when gathered as a congregation in the flesh than through your screen and speakers but Jesus is creative – as Saul discovered.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 9.2-4

So as you are sitting at home a month since we have gathered in Aalst,

**Qa** What is it about Jesus present in his church that you are missing?

**Qb** What feature or experience of the Risen Lord in his Church might you be missing from Sunday Worship now?

Probing questions!

The beauty of this lockdown is that we are being ‘made to lie down’.

- We are deprived of the sacraments in Communion and Baptism.
  - Bishop Robert calls this a ‘fast’.
- We are deprived of each other and the joy of fellowship.
- Adults and children are deprived of their friends and formational ministry etc.

This is not where we want to be even when made to lie down in our comfortable homes.

There are good reasons for missing church on Sunday as we remember it and there are not so good reasons.

In this lockdown deprivation -or extended Lent- we have an opportunity to let go of any frivolous or immature reasons for why we might normally be at church and focus on the real and true basis.

That is the Resurrected Jesus:

- present by his Spirit,
- heard in his Word,
- received in Sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist,
- recognised and enjoyed in the life of his people joined in worship.

These are good reasons for church – related to how Jesus identifies with his church.

To bring this home I made a list of alternative reasons I have heard over the years for people coming on Sunday as we used to before lockdown.

**Q.** Why gather on Sunday or why ‘go to church’?

**A1.** I enjoy it.

**A2.** I meet and make good friends there.

**A3.** It provides some life balance amidst my stress.

**A4.** Good for us as a family.

**A5.** I was born a Christian so it’s what we do.

**A6.** It makes my weekend.

**A7.** It’s habit, I can’t not come.

**A8.** It’s a spiritual protection and safety in a dark world.

**A9.** It’s a safe welcoming English speaking community.

**A10.** I go to find the encouragement I need.

etc...

All those answers or reasons for gathering as church are inadequate.

They would not satisfy Thomas the disciple.

If he was going to remain part of what was left of the Jesus movement, there had to be a real living Jesus and not just some pleasant people with nice values.

So he demanded some reality, show me a living Jesus with the body I remember.

We are gathered here on Zoom.

Some day I believe- we will re-gather in Aalst.

I pray that in the light of the Resurrection, the Risen Jesus will be more the rightful centre of our faith as individuals and our life as his church.

But why wait for that?

Even in lockdown stress Jesus came and breathed among them and commanded his peace.

That can be part of our lockdown too, even when gathering through Zoom. Seeing each other is nice but seeing even 10 cents worth of Jesus is awesome. That's what Thomas models for us and what we should be looking for.

The Lord is Risen! *He is Risen Indeed.*

Following Reading:

**1 Peter 1:3-9** (ESV)

*Born Again to a Living Hope*

<sup>3</sup>Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, <sup>4</sup>to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, <sup>5</sup>who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. <sup>6</sup>In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, <sup>7</sup>so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. <sup>8</sup>Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, <sup>9</sup>obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.