

Sermon for the University Church St Mary the Virgin. April 19th.

The Gospel Reading is taken from John 20:24–29.

May I speak in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Having faith is not easy in times of darkness and doubt. Yet Easter, especially this one, affords us the space to question our Christian response to despair and suffering.

It is also a time we contemplate and celebrate the Lord's triumph over death, with the extraordinary and miraculous Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

One of my favourite artistic illustration of Risen Christ is by the famous painter Caravaggio. In *The Incredulity of St Thomas*, painted in 1603, Caravaggio draws your eye to focus on Thomas' right hand, which is being gently held by Christ and led towards his open wound. The concentration and astonishment on Thomas's face is truly humbling. He seems to be trying to process the new phenomenon or, as Archbishop Ramsey puts it, this "new order of existence" where his Lord is in the corporeal world while yet not fully part of it.

When I look more closely at the picture, however, I am more drawn to the face of Christ, whose expression is gentle with understanding of Thomas's difficulty in believing his own eyes. He understands the fears and doubts Thomas has grappled with over the preceding week. Just a few days earlier his master had been betrayed, condemned, crucified and left for dead. All was over. Thomas had not been with the other disciples as far as we know when Christ has appeared to them in the locked room (John 20.19) and he certainly did not believe what they said. Thomas must have been suffering. Perhaps he was asking where was God when He was most needed? Had He forsaken his Son? And if He could do that, what hope was there for anyone else? Maybe the words of the Psalm 13 were weighting on his heart.

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me for ever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I bear pain* in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?”.

But what is clear is that Christ did not condemn Thomas for his doubts. Instead, he understood that doubt and disbelief were part of his spiritual journey, not separate from it. He was a sincere disciple, but one whose faith was wobbling. He'd get there in the end, with a little help.

So he said: “Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands” (John 20:27). And Thomas's response was immediate. He fell down at Jesus's feet and exclaimed with a warm, passionate cry of joy, “My Lord and my God!” Doubt was swept away by belief and he saw the Living Christ in a new light, as one who had conquered death. The Lord knew that once Thomas had fought his way through the wilderness, his dark night of the soul, he would be a symbol to Christians forever, one which illustrates the inevitability of doubt, and its importance for strengthening faith, rather than weakening it.

We all suffer and have doubts. But the Lord guides us through that suffering to an even stronger belief.

All great mystics have grappled with this relationship between despair and faith. The phrase "dark night of the soul" comes from a 16th-century poem by the Spanish Catholic Saint John of the Cross, who knew faith could be found in the dark, for he wrote that “in this darkness God protects the soul. Cast your care upon God for you are His and He will not forget you. Do not think that He is leaving you alone, for that would be to wrong Him.”

Other Saints have fought through despair and doubt which made them question their faith. Mother Teresa once wrote to a priest that “Jesus has a

very special love for you. As for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear,”

Now, in this time of frustration, isolation and pain all our lives are on pause. Doubt and fear are at the heart of our daily lives and we all have the potential of suffering a dark night of the soul for us all.

For Rowan (who?) the challenge of the Resurrection appearances is whether the rest of us can believe without seeing – and be aware of the Loving Lord living in us, amongst us and working through us. William (and who he, too) says that what ultimately matters lies in how we respond, how our understanding of it changes our currently reality. “If by standing where Jesus invites you to stand, you see more than you would otherwise, if you see a world larger than you thought you inhabited, you have to ask yourself. Is not this reality? And if this might be the truth, might be the grain of the real world, where do I want to put myself”?

Can we therefore see the sign of the Lord’s presence in the faith and actions of others - especially at the moment? God’s love is in people’s response to the fear, doubt and distress – the delivery of food to the old, the compassion of nurses, the bravery of doctors, the labours of scientists. But it is also present in what George Elliot calls “unhistoric acts” – the desire to volunteer, to contribute and do something – anything -- of use

“for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.” (Middlemarch)

But also lies in seeing what was not seen and appreciating what was not appreciated. We are realising just who it is who keeps our society working,

who we need in a real crisis. We could do very nicely without celebrities, bankers, priests and novelists. We couldn't survive at all without those who stack the shelves of supermarkets, or clean the toilets in hospitals. On many memorials put up after the First World War and the great pandemic that followed are the words "lest we forget." We should think about putting them up again.

And many of us are breathing fresh, clean air in cities for the first time, hearing birds once drowned out by traffic. It is an unexpected delight, but we must also remember that we can do so because our treatment and trafficking of animals, often in horrific conditions, let loose this virus into the world.

The closing down of our world has given us the opportunity to renew old friendships and rekindle ties with family, and to sit and ponder: how on earth did we get to the point where it needed a disaster on such a scale to make us appreciate once more the song of birds, the miracle of the seasons. They were all around us, all the time, God's greatest gift, and we stopped noticing them.

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Conclusion.

We *all* face the same virus— a virus that unites the world - as it cuts across ages, borders, faiths and communities. All at once we have been transported into a new reality- like the new reality the disciples' experience with the Risen Lord. This Easter is like none other any of us have known, the only time in history when the definition of a good and responsible Christian is one who doesn't go to church.

We doubt, we worry, about where this is going, and how it will end. And Christ is as compassionate with us as he was with Thomas. Worry is sensible,

doubt is inevitable, when you are in the darkness. To have doubts and to grapple with them is part of our journey and also part of our calling to believe without seeing, to know without proving, that Christ works through us, and loves through us; that he has never abandoned us and never will. Today and tomorrow and always. Amen.