

Sermon for Easter 2, 16 April 2023 – John 20:19-31

Seeing is believing, or is it?

Alleluia. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

The Easter story lays out for us the foundations of our Christian faith but it also contrasts doubt and disbelief, the difficulty of believing with the deep peace of true belief.

In today's Gospel we encounter the disciples in a bit of a tizz, struggling with doubt and disbelief, struggling to believe. Confused, afraid, they've locked themselves in a room. They've had a rough time – a strange dinner where Jesus washes their feet, predicts his betrayal and declares himself – in Luke and John he describes himself as the Son of Man in whom God has been glorified, in Matthew and Mark says he will not drink the fruit of the vine with the disciples again until he drinks it new with them in his Father's kingdom.

They've fallen asleep as Jesus prays in the garden of Gethsemane.

Peter and Judas have both betrayed Jesus and by their betrayals, handed him over to the Roman authorities to be crucified. Jesus has been crucified, he's died and been buried – the horror of this must have been huge. Then Jesus' tomb is found - empty.

Mary Magdalene according to Mark or Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of Jesus and the other women according to Luke, encounter Jesus outside the tomb. But when they

tell the disciples, they are not believed. We know the story well.

Then in today's Gospel Jesus appears to the disciples in the room they have locked themselves in. Thomas isn't there. He still doesn't believe. It takes Jesus appearing in the room a second time and Thomas putting his finger in Jesus's side and seeing his hands for Thomas to believe.

There are such strong parallels with our post-modern world in this Gospel.

What can we be sure is true? What amounts to proof? What evidence can we rely on? We see this in the hatred poured out on people for their religion, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and political belief. We saw how this played out during the early phases of the Covid pandemic with misinformation and mistrust culminating in the riots at parliament. We see it as we watch the environmental crisis manifest in our world. The horror of all this is huge. The struggle to find firm ground is a real.

So where should we look for certainty? In this information age where information flows in torrents and at speed, what should we believe? How should we ground ourselves?

Today's Gospel describes Jesus manifesting himself to the disciples, showing himself as the incarnation of God. It's one of a number of such instances. Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene by the tomb, Jesus eats fish on the beach with the disciples, Jesus appears to the disciples on the road to Emmaus and breaking bread at table with them, Jesus asks for something to eat and eats the broiled fish he is given.

Richard Rohr says that the core message of the incarnation of God in Jesus is that the Divine Presence is here, in us and in all of creation, and not only “over there” in some far-off realm. He points out that all four Gospels describe how the Risen Christ transcended doors, walls, spaces, water, air, and times, eating food, always interacting with the real matter of the world. In these encounters Christ has some kind of physical presence but it’s a different kind of embodiment. Mark describes it at the end of his Gospel, as Christ showing himself but in another form. (Mark 16:12). This is a new presence, a new of embodiment, and a new manifestation of God in the world.

In the Gospel today, neither the disciples nor Thomas recognise Jesus immediately. When he first appears in the room, it’s not till Jesus shows them his hands and side that the disciples seem to recognise him. For Thomas, it takes a bit more – he needs to put his finger in Jesus’ side. The disciples and Thomas see Jesus but initially they do not recognise him for what he is. Recognition is not immediate. Recognition seeps in, slowly sometimes, more rapidly at other times, until we fully understand – understand in the way Thomas understands as he exclaims “My Lord and My God.” Even though Jesus reproves Thomas suggesting that he has only believed because he has seen and declaring that those who have not seen and yet believe are blessed, it is clear that Thomas recognises who Jesus is.

So seeing and recognising are not the same thing. We have probably seen this happen in our own lives. We come to things slowly, we're unclear, confused and then a deep certainty settles in us, we not only see, we recognise, we understand. Truth makes its home in us and never leaves.

Often recognition grows from small and scattered seeds, random encounters, snippets of seeing, brief touches. Sometimes it grows out of a deep connection with another person, a long, sustaining relationship in which someone sees us in the way Jesus saw Thomas and meets us.

For me, this is what belief is about.

It is as much about doubt as it is about certainty. Believing doesn't mean we need to be rock solid all the time? Belief ebbs and flows, it has shallows and depths, mountains and valleys.

Thomas needed evidence and we too hunger for evidence. We are full of questioning, searching, waiting and longing along with moments when deep truth emerges in us. Those moments change us, they reveal our fullness, our perfection, that we are beloved of God and when we see those things in ourselves, we see it in everything and in everyone, we see them in a tangible, real way, in the midst of our lives and we know love.

That experience of our belovedness brings with us the peace which Jesus offered to the disciples in the locked room, the deep shalom that comes with glimpsing love. It's a light that burns constantly within us. This is not to deny that at times it feels faint and flickering and our grasp on it is flimsy nor to say that believing is always easy but to point to the certainty and constancy of God's love for us in the midst of all that.

And so I bring this reflective sermon to a close, offering all of us in our belovedness to God .

In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer and Giver of Life, Amen

Amanda Mark