

Haverhill Methodist Church – Worship at Home

Sunday 19th April 2020
Second Sunday of Easter

Welcome Message – Revd. Peter Goodhall

Today in our worship we hold an audience with the disciple Thomas. Uncondemned by Jesus for his doubts, Thomas is helped to a place of recognition, peace, worship and trust. Today may the risen Lord help us to make a similar journey and so proclaim Jesus as 'My Lord and my God'.

Read Psalm 16 and consider where your current 'boundary lines' lie and so discover reasons to be thankful to God.

Hymn/song

Prayer of Adoration

Creator God, we cannot see you any more than we can see the wind that moves the clouds and stirs the trees. But we see the power and beauty of your creation and that is enough to prompt our praise.

Caring God, we cannot always perceive your love among the pain and suffering of our world. But we see Jesus, arrested and tried, tortured and killed, and risen again to prompt our faith in your love and mercy.

Inspiring God, we often find it difficult to discern your work from the outward appearance of your church. But we recognize that men and women, boys and girls, are brought to faith and grow in grace, and that is enough to strengthen our confidence in your hidden but powerful presence.

Creating, Caring, Inspiring God, help us to acknowledge that what is seen is here today and gone tomorrow, but that your love, though unseen, lasts forever. Amen.

In his account of the resurrection, John confirms the gift of the Spirit, the commission to forgive sins, and the challenge to believe, without having seen Jesus. We have here a glimpse of the strength, the discipline, and the faith of the early church.

Read John Chapter 20 verses 19-31

Prayer of confession

Thomas has long had a reputation as a doubter.

What is my reputation, Lord?

If I'm honest, I think that fits me, too.

Forgive me that sometimes

I find it much easier to doubt than to believe.

Forgive me for the times when,

like Thomas, I demand proof.

Often, all I really need to do is

allow myself the space and time to reflect,

and to let you bring your love into my life.

Amen.

Hymn/song

Sermon by Gavin Payne

Opening Prayer:

Lord Jesus, as we explore your Word this morning, speak to us through the power of your Holy Spirit.

May we learn more about you through your visit to the disciples on the evening of that first Easter Sunday, and through the example of Thomas a week later and his journey of faith to recognising you as his Lord and God.

Today, may we reflect on our own journey of faith and the work you have for each one of us. Amen.

Fear to Joy through the peace of the Lord

There is a lot of fear around at the moment, fear due to the current pandemic, fear for the now, and fear for the future – we live in times of great uncertainty. On the evening of that first Easter Sunday, the disciples were living in fear. All of them, except for Thomas, were together having locked themselves away from the authorities. They had seen their master and teacher tried, crucified and buried in a tomb and the latest was now that his body had disappeared. On top of that, Mary was saying that she met him in the garden and that he was alive.

The Jewish authorities were searching for them, to arrest them, imprison them, possibly kill them- no wonder they were full of fear.

Now I really like what happens next, it always feels a little understated in the Gospel, Jesus performs an amazing act, but it is hardly mentioned.

Although the doors were locked, Jesus stood among them.

If I was fearing for my life, if my doors were locked and someone stood in front of me - I would be more than a little frightened.

Four simple words, from Jesus, turned the disciples fear into joy, Jesus said "Peace be with you!"

Jesus is able to turn fears to joy - he is able to bring his peace to any situation.

In John 14:27, Jesus states: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives.

Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

Jesus' peace gave the disciples confidence and turned their fear to joy. The disciples don't though just experience peace - they experience the joy of knowing the Lord is with them.

Through his resurrection, Jesus brings peace to the believer.

Jesus offers all of us this peace, which although is always offered and given, seems especially comforting at this present time – Jesus is always with us, in the good times and in the difficult times.

In preparing this talk, I wondered how much like Thomas the disciples were on that First Easter Sunday - were there any doubts in their minds? Verse 20 states that after Jesus had offered them the peace, "He showed them his hands and sides" - was this required for them to believe? Was this a confirmation of his identity? Consider for a moment, how often are you asked to validate, to prove your identity? Currently, you may be asked to confirm your identity as part of the current lockdown. Many key workers carry letters of authority stating the purpose for they are away from home. We are all asked to enter our PIN numbers or show some form of identification if we want to withdraw money from the bank or if we spend a significant amount of money on a purchase. If we travel abroad - we have to carry our passport and other paperwork to enter another country. In our workplaces, we carry identification to convince others that we have the right to be there.

Jesus showed the disciples his hands and side - he validated, he proved his identity.

When the disciples realised that it was Jesus, they were overjoyed – fear was gone, they had received the peace of the Lord and they were filled with joy!

In verse 21, we see the reason why Jesus was standing among them. First and foremost, the disciples had to know, had to understand and realise that Jesus had resurrected, that he had conquered sin. Only then could Jesus move on to the main reason for his visit to the disciples.

Verses 21 to 23 - Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Just to take an aside for the moment, many people argue that Jesus appeared to his disciples as a ghostly form of some kind, that he wasn't physically there.

But John clearly states in verse 22 that he breathed on them. Breath is an essential sign of life. The first thing you learn in any kind of first aid is to look for signs of life, to speak to the injured person and if there is no response to check whether they are breathing. Jesus was alive, he was no ghost or apparition - he existed, appearing in flesh and bones.

The presence of Jesus transforms the disciples from a group of terrified hideaways back into a missionary community - ready to carry out the Lord's work.

Jesus' earthly mission had finished; the mission was now being passed onto his disciples. Here, Jesus was empowering them with the power of the Holy Spirit to do this mission work.

You may be thinking "Surely, the disciples received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost? Here they appear to be receiving the Holy Spirit earlier?"

A number of commentators suggest that this episode is an anticipation of Pentecost - a private infilling compared with the public empowerment by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Additionally, a number of commentators emphasise that in this account, the whole Godhead - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - are involved in the commissioning of the disciples to go out into the world and continue Jesus work.

In this passage, the true foundation of the Gospel message is emphasised, it is the forgiveness of sins. Jesus was arrested, tried and crucified to facilitate the forgiveness of sins.

Through his resurrection, he conquered death and enabled believers to experience a new relationship with God through Jesus. The heart of the Good News being that people need to have their sins forgiven in order to have a renewed relationship with God.

While only God can forgive sins, the disciples were given the authority to forgive sins through the authority of Jesus and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

Doubting Thomas – An Unfair Label? An example of coming to faith?

Have you ever played that game where you compare your character traits with famous people, or sometimes fictional, or maybe even cartoon characters - to see who you are most like? Well, I wonder, which of Jesus' disciples would you say you are most like?

I would suggest that we all have a lot of association with the disciple Thomas!

Part of today's lectionary readings relate to Thomas because it was a week after Jesus' resurrection that Jesus appeared again before the disciples, but this time, including Thomas. We don't know why Thomas wasn't present on that first Easter Sunday, he had business elsewhere - that is not important. What is important is Thomas's initial attitude and disbelief in the resurrection and his journey to recognising Jesus as his Lord and God.

What words do you associate with the disciple Thomas?

I would almost guarantee that one of the first words you came up with was "Doubting Thomas"

Do you ever feel that maybe Thomas has been unfairly labelled?

I certainly do, after all in the end, don't we all begin as doubting Thomases when it comes to Jesus and our faith?

Before we explore today's reading a little further, let us briefly explore what the Gospels tell us about Thomas and perhaps a little more about his character.

Thomas is not really discussed in the first three Gospels, it is only in John's gospel that we discover more about this disciple and his character.

In John 11:16, we are told that Thomas was prepared to go with Jesus to the tomb of Lazarus - this could have led to him being arrested and put to death by the Jewish authorities.

Thomas was prepared to risk his life for Jesus.

In John 14:5, Thomas says to Jesus, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Thomas, like many of the disciples at the time, lacked the understanding of Jesus' message.

If we look at Thomas' testimony of his meeting with Jesus on the evening of the first Sunday after Easter, we see a pattern that applies to all those who have come to Christ since Thomas.

First, there is the disbelief - Thomas didn't believe that Jesus was alive, he didn't believe in the resurrection.

Secondly, Thomas meets with Jesus, Jesus challenges Thomas – using the very words of denial Thomas had used in the absence of Jesus - to put his fingers in the wounds of his hands, for Thomas to place his hand in his side - to believe that Jesus had indeed conquered death, that the resurrection had taken place, that Jesus was alive!

John's account of this encounter does not state whether Thomas did place his fingers in Jesus' wounds. Commentators suggest that John would have written it if Thomas had indeed done so.

What are key are the words that Thomas state next - "My Lord and my God". This is the moment of coming to faith, the believer's statement of faith - recognising Jesus for who he is - Lord and God. The example of Thomas should a source of encouragement both to believers and to those who are not yet believers.

It is okay to have doubts, but it is essential to have faith.

The difference between Thomas' testimony and our testimonies is that he physically met with Jesus - there was physical proof of the resurrection. But, at the same time, there was also faith - Thomas' declaration of faith - "My Lord and my God!"

Thomas had faith in who Jesus was, his earlier confusion was now clear, all the wonders that he had seen Jesus do, all the things that Jesus had said and that Thomas had not understood, are now clear. Jesus is Thomas's Lord and God - King and Saviour.

The risen Jesus is alive, he is able to transform our fear into joy through his peace, he is able to bring doubt to faith – may our faith grow in and through him. Amen

Response Prayer

Father God, Thomas is so often viewed as someone who lacked faith because he doubted - but as we have explored today, we have so much to learn from his example. Yes, he had doubts, but he was faithful to you - he recognised you as his Lord and his God.

May we come to know you in every deeper ways through our faith. Help us to place our faith ever more in you, guide us as we walk with you, speak to us and may we be obedient to your calling.

Empower us by the power of your Holy Spirit - deepen our love for you and for our neighbours. We ask all these prayers through the name of Jesus, our Saviour, our Lord and our God!
Amen.

Hymn/song

Prayers for Others

Risen Lord, like those first disciples, your church meets behind closed doors today.

Come stand among us and speak words of peace we pray.

(Pray for the Church...especially persecuted Christians)

Risen Lord, like those first disciples, many today live in fear.

(Name those fears and pray for the worlds needs)

The scripture 1 John 4:18 tells us that perfect love drives out fear.

(Pray for the love and peace of Jesus to drive away all fear)

Risen Lord, you showed your wounds to your disciples.

(Pray for those who are wounded by sickness, grief, sadness or trouble. Pray for carers who reach out to touch and heal, especially those from our congregation on the front line of medical care.

Pray for your own needs)

Let us fix our eyes on the glory of the risen Lord, let us receive the breath of His Holy Spirit and be made ready to unlock our closed doors. Amen. Unite your prayers with the whole church as you pray The Lord's Prayer. 'Our Father...'

Hymn/song

The Blessing

We offer our lives and our gifts to the Lord.

'Without having seen him you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy.

As the outcome of your faith you obtain the salvation of your souls'.

(1 Peter 1:8-9)

May the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, rest upon you and your homes, this day and forevermore.

Amen.

Coffee Time Conversation

- What do you take from today's Bible Reading and message?
- What helps you to move from doubt or fear to faith?
- 'The presence of Jesus transforms the disciples from a group of terrified hideaways back into a missionary community - ready to carry out the Lord's work'. How does this apply to Haverhill Methodist Church? And to your life?

Suggested Hymns and Songs

More Traditional Music:

The head that once was crowned

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OVPGVxhhToo>

Now the green blade rises

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g-5Bi2jM40E>

God sent His Son (Because He Lives)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=egBSduThg3k>

Standing on the promises

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nRibuWMg5BU>

More Contemporary Music:

Greatest Day in History

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_9QiWorBaY

All heaven declares

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ImFVg-Taoq0>

I believe in Jesus

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P1OZZOfSX08>

Keep socially isolated.

Keep safe.

Keep communicating.

Keep celebrating the Resurrection of our Lord.

God bless you and keep you until we meet again.

My prayers are with you.

With love,

Peter