



Low Sunday Message - 19th April 2020 Transcript

Hello everyone! I hope that you are well, and that you are coping with each day. We thank God for the beauty of Spring unfolding around us, even though we are unable to enjoy it in the way we would normally do. I thought I'd begin today with some images of our daily walk. This area is part of the old course of the Irwell, which ran through here before the Manchester Ship Canal was built. It's a beautiful peaceful place, just five minutes walk from our house, where we can see herons, and mallards and coots, and even the occasional kingfisher.

This is the Sunday after Easter, and we are still very much in the season of Resurrection, because Jesus who was dead, is alive! Not just on Easter Sunday, but always. We live in a time and a place when Jesus is alive.

More about that in a moment.

Let's hear the Gospel reading set for today, which begins with events that happened late on the day of Resurrection itself.

Bible Reading John 20: 19 - 31

Jesus Appears to His Disciples

It was late that Sunday evening, and the disciples were gathered together behind locked doors, because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities. Then Jesus came and stood among them. "Peace be with you," he said. After saying this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples were filled with joy at seeing the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I send you." Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive people's sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

One of the twelve disciples, Thomas (called the Twin), was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" Thomas said to them, "Unless I see the scars of the nails in his hands and put my finger on those scars and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later the disciples were together again indoors, and Thomas was with them. The doors were locked, but Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and look at my hands; then reach out your hand and put it in my side. Stop your doubting, and believe!" Thomas answered him, "My Lord

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*and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Do you believe because you see me?
How happy are those who believe without seeing me!"*

*In his disciples' presence Jesus performed many other miracles which are
not written down in this book. But these have been written in order that
you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that
through your faith in him you may have life.*

There were lots of comments last Sunday about how much people enjoyed singing, so I thought we'd do that again. Today, we'll sing "Now The Green Blade Rises" and the accompaniment to this is a recording I made about 25 years ago with a bunch of teenagers from my church. So let's sing the song together

Song: Now the Green Blade Rises

*Now the green blade rises
from the buried grain,
wheat that in the dark earth
many days has lain;
Love lives again,
that with the dead has been:
Love is come again,
like wheat that springs up green.*

*In the grave they laid him,
Love who men had slain,
thinking that he never
would awake again,
laid in the earth
like grain that sleeps unseen:
Love is come again,
like wheat that springs up green.*

*Forth he came at Easter,
like the risen grain,
he that for the three days
in the grave had lain,
quick from the dead
my risen Lord is seen:
Love is come again,
like wheat that springs up green.*

*When our hearts are wintry,
grieving, or in pain,
then your touch can call us
back to life again,
fields of our hearts*

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*that dead and bare have been:
Love is come again,
like wheat that springs up green.*

John Maceod Cambell Crum (1872-1958)

When we think about Christmas, we have loads of images that we associate with that time of year: stars and angels, shepherds, kings, a stable, a manger, and of course a sleeping baby. All the images we expect to see on Christmas cards. When we think of Holy Week, we also have many things on which to focus: the whip, the robe, the crown of thorns, and of course the cross itself. But the things related to resurrection are not so easy to visualise. There is, of course, the empty tomb, but it is empty. And there are the grave clothes, but they too are empty. And it says in the Gospels, "He's not here. He is risen." The Romans at the time told everyone that the tomb was empty, because Jesus's followers had stolen the body, then put it out there that he is alive. Emptiness is no proof of anything. Much as we might like it to be different, there is no proof of resurrection. No artefact that you can hold in your hand that says, this is the proof that he is alive.

Think about Mary for a moment. She was the first person to arrive at the tomb, once the Sabbath was over. She saw the stone rolled away, and the tomb empty. And she ran to tell the disciples, who also came to take a look. But even though she had been with Jesus, and heard him talk of rising, the empty tomb did not make her believe. She needed no proof that Jesus had died: she's been there and had seen the agony, and the torment and the blood. She was fully aware of his death. But the empty tomb didn't lead her into hope and celebration. Instead she stood outside, lost, and overcome by grief. In that moment of overwhelming sadness, the risen Jesus reached out to her, with his voice. He spoke her name, she turned towards him, and she knew that he was alive. The proof for her was in the intimacy of his voice calling her name.

Today's reading focused on Thomas - doubting Thomas, as he is always dubbed. Thomas was missing when Jesus met with the other disciples later on the day of resurrection, and when he breathed his Spirit upon them. Thomas wasn't there, we don't know the reason, but he didn't see Jesus alive with his own eyes that day. And in spite of the witnesses to that resurrection being his close friends and companions, he was still skeptical. How can I believe unless I've seen it for myself? For a week Thomas held on to his cynicism, John tells us. He was determined to stay that way. "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were I won't believe he is alive", said Thomas. Doubting is not a bad thing in itself. Thomas was just not ready to take a step of faith, based on the testimony of others. Many of us have found ourselves in that place. Others seem so confident, so sure in their faith. But I need my own proof. Jesus understood Thomas. He understands the human heart, human emotions, human skepticism, human doubts. He lived on earth as a human being for more



than thirty years and experienced every possible human emotion.

And so, a week later, when the disciples were once again all together, and Thomas among them this time, Jesus appeared again, speaking words of peace to them all. Then he turned his attention to Thomas, and reached out to him. He invited Thomas to touch the wounds, knowing that Thomas had so loudly declared that this would be the proof that he needed. It's Thomas's words in that moment that matter because he didn't say to Jesus, "welcome back mate, I can see and feel now that you are alive". Thomas didn't address Jesus, as his friend and companion of those recent years on the roads of ministry around Galilee. Instead he declared his faith in a risen Saviour, with the words, "My Lord and my God."

Thinking back to the empty tomb. The tomb in itself could not provide any proof of resurrection. But it is the empty tomb that sets off the questions which can lead to faith. Mary asked, where have you taken him, and found the answer in the calming voice of Jesus. Thomas asked, how can I believe if I haven't seen for myself, and touched for myself? And Jesus gave him that opportunity.

Another story of that time takes us along the road away from Jerusalem, where disciples who had witnessed the horrors of recent days, were returning home with heavy hearts. As they walked, they asked questions, but could find no answers. They puzzled over the stories that had already been circulating that Jesus had been seen alive, but none of it seemed to make any sense to them. A stranger came alongside them, and joined in their conversation. He helped them to find answers, in the Scriptures, and he worked through their questions with them. They were very grateful, and invited him to be their guest at the end of the journey. But at no point did they recognise him as the risen Jesus. It wasn't until the moment when he broke bread at the start of their meal together, that they knew him. They recognised him in an action they had seen Jesus do many times before. And then their questions found answers that led to hope and new life.

The empty tomb raises questions, but it can never be the proof of resurrection. In those early days after he rose, Jesus was able to give proof through a personal experience to many people, and some of their stories are recorded in the Gospels. But we also have questions. We also look at the empty tomb and wonder at what it means. But it is our own questions, and in our own personal experience of our living God, alive and with us that can find the proof of resurrection for ourselves.

The story of resurrection is not just a story about one man overcoming death and rising again. And it's not just a story for one day of the year. That man, Jesus Christ, was alive on that day, and is, as Thomas declared, our Lord and our God. He came alive that day, and he is alive still. And he is there to be encountered in this life. We celebrate Easter year on year, but we can celebrate

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resurrection and encounter with our living God every day of our lives. The mystery of the empty tomb leads us too to questions, and in our questioning, and in the living Christ reaching out to us, through his living Spirit, we find our own proof of resurrection. No one can give it to us on a plate. We need to know it for ourselves, and that knowing is life-changing.

May you know in your heart and experience it in your own life that He is alive. He is with us. We are never alone, and never will be. And our hope is in him, our living loving Saviour. John's gospel ends with some of the most important words that you will ever hear: "Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

Believe not just in the testimony of others though, but be very sure that the certainty and commitment of others are a very powerful witness that can lead us into faith. But also believe because you have met with the risen Christ, in your lonely times, in your questioning times, in your hurting times, and in your joyful times. Invite him to share with you, and find your proof in the love and peace and hope that you experience for yourself.

Let us pray.

Open our hearts, Lord, to see this world as you see it: a world full of people that you made and people that you love; people who let you down in all sorts of ways; who hurt each other and who are unfair towards each other; people who are selfish and cruel and who fight and kill and argue and hate. And right now, it is a world full of people who know fear, and sadness, and suffering, and uncertainty. We believe that you love every person in this world as your own child. We pray for your peace to reach to every corner of this world; we pray for your touch to reach every life, and for your hope to carry us through these hard times. We pray for your healing of those who are ill, and for your comfort to be real those who are grieving. We thank you for all the evidence of your love in action in this world right now, both through those that know you and through those that have never consciously connected with you. In all that is happening right now, we thank you that you, our Risen Living Saviour, are in every moment with us all.

Open our hearts, Lord, to see your church as you see it, as your body on earth, at one with you, and ready to reach out with your hand of love to those in need. In these uncertain times, when our buildings are closed, and your flock is scattered, help us to see your church as you see it: not as buildings opened up for an hour or two for worship each week, but as people who have connected with your living Spirit, and found you in the experiences of our own lives; as people worshipping you, wherever we find ourselves, even though we are apart, and as people empowered by your Spirit to work with you in your world, to bring your hope and your touch, your voice and your peace to those whose lives touch

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ours in any way. We cannot meet, or touch, and join our voices in praise together right now, but your church is no less alive, and no less your people. We celebrate that fact in all we do and say, as we live through these strange experiences, always in your presence.

We bring our prayers in the name of the risen Jesus,
And we pray as he called us to pray....

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those that trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen

Earlier in the year, I met to do some song-writing with Rev. Raj Patta, a minister in the United Stockport circuit, who just happens to be Tracy's minister. Raj and I have written several songs together in the last year or so. Some of you will remember the Christmas song which I used in a few churches and some of you will also have heard our song for Pentecost last year, which I'm sure will also be used this year. Raj had some ideas for Easter that he wanted us to explore together. Easter felt a long way off in January, but we considered resurrection, very much along the lines of everything I have said this morning. Then life got busy and our notes sat in a folder in my office for quite some time. But social isolation led me to revisit them, and the song emerged slowly from the ideas. Raj shared the resulting song with his churches last Sunday, and I share it with you now. May God bless you with the peace of his touch, and with his living hope, today and in the days ahead. Amen.

Song: Mary, are you weeping?

*Mary, are you weeping,
Mary are you searching?
Mary, on this morning, are you lost?
Mary, look around you,
new hope breaks beside you,
In the clear, familiar voice,
your comfort will be found.*

*Thomas, are you doubting,
Thomas, disbelieving?
Thomas, so distrustful in your loss.
Thomas, turn around now,
Thomas, reach your hand out,
In the gentle honest touch,
your healing will be found.*



*Tired hearts, heading homewards,
walk, with many questions,
Disciples drown in hopelessness and loss.
Listen to his wisdom,
bathe in reassurance,
In the breaking of the bread,
your new hope will be found.*

*The story hasn't ended,
it's always just beginning,
A mystery unfolding here and now.
Each one needs to own it,
He's not here, for he is risen,
On the earth no longer dead,
alive, and yet unbound.*

*Questions needing answers
in every generation,
The empty open tomb is where they start.
God's here among the living,
he doesn't need to prove it,
In it all, and here among us,
he is living, he is found.*

Raj Bharath Patta & Clare Stainsby

*Now The Green Blade rises - John Macleod Cambell Crum
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Mary, are you weeping? - Raj Bharath Patta and Clare Stainsby
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