

Easter 2 John 20:19-31

As we continue this season of Easter we are reminded constantly of the greatest miracle our Lord performed, that of his own resurrection from the dead. It is something many people struggle with, miracles in general cause a great deal of scepticism but this particular miracle is the thing that stands in the way of many people who would otherwise wish to live lives more aligned with the teaching of Jesus. Even with us committed church regulars, it is a tricky one, we don't pretend to understand it, we take it on faith and sometimes are less comfortable with it than we dare express openly, but it is not negotiable, it's one of those pesky things that is in all 4 gospels and is not easily explained away so somehow we accept it.

So it is quite comforting in a way that today we are reminded that even those closest to Jesus were struggling to accept this miracle. Those who had seen him perform healings and extract demons, those who had picked up the many baskets of leftovers that appeared when thousands shared one child's lunch, those who had heard him teach in a way no one had ever heard anyone teach before, even these disciples were sceptical.

After the initial appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene and her witness to the disciples, they were still locked up in a room together, afraid of the authorities, afraid for their lives, trying to make sense of what this woman was saying and probably erring on the side of disbelief. After all, culturally women were not considered reliable witnesses, a woman could not, in this society, testify in court as a witness to anything, so why would these men, brought up to disbelieve women, accept anything Mary had to say? She was emotional, probably delusional, certainly unreliable.

But then Jesus appears to the disciples, well most of them, anyway, and they could no longer ignore Mary's testimony. He stood amongst them and they saw him, all of them, not one at a time in some sort of dream, but all together, in a locked room. And yet, one was missing. Thomas, also called the twin, was out. Unlucky timing, or perfect timing from the Lord. You see Thomas was likely to have been the least easy to convince that Jesus had appeared. As a twin, he would have been used to people being easily fooled. Mary probably saw a man a bit like Jesus through her tears and her brain filled in the gaps. When he got back to hear the disciples ranting about their encounter with the risen Lord he would need a bit more than that.

How many times must Thomas have been mistaken for his twin? How often was he told, hey I saw you the other day in the city why didn't you acknowledge me, only to have to reply, it wasn't me, I wasn't there, that would be my brother you saw. Thomas knew how easy it was for people to see what they wanted to see not what was actually there. Thomas was never going to believe because someone else saw it.

Jesus appears in the same way, a week later, the disciples are still locked away together, still afraid, still unconvinced as a group that they have seen what they think they have seen. Thomas, most likely, was unwilling to move on in faith, not only because he could still see scope for a case of mistaken identity but I expect also because he was a bit put out that he had not been part of the first experience. So stubbornness took hold until Jesus was there again, this time just for Thomas, to satisfy even the most closed minded sceptic that he was there, solid body, feel the wounds, alive again but not whole, still bearing the scars of crucifixion.

But this was the last time that could happen, for Jesus to physically present himself for one particular sceptic. The rest of us are reliant on the testimony of those who have gone before us and on our own experience. We would all love to stamp our feet like Thomas and demand an audience with Jesus, but an audience with Jesus is possible to us through prayer not in this physical world. It is no less real, it is much like the experience St. Paul had, having been converted on the road to Damascus by an already ascended Christ, it is something that occurs through the spirit and not by the body.

And just like Thomas, we can also be guilty of feeling a bit put out about the way others communicate with God, through Christ. Some have life changing moments of being filled with the spirit, some can pin point an event where grace was obtained in their life. For the rest of us, we can be a bit defensive about not having a similar story to tell. We can be a bit like Thomas, we can insist it's not real, whatever happened to you, because it didn't happen like that for me.

I would suggest, that what we can learn from Jesus' various appearances to his disciples, and the fact that he didn't appear to everyone and anyone, that differing experiences of coming to faith and living in faith are inevitable. Some of us will have a moment, like Thomas, when it is all spelt out for us, no room to doubt anymore, here it is. Others of us will have an experience more like Charles Wesley, Anglican Priest and founder of the Methodist movement, who after years of church attendance and ordained ministry, suddenly felt his heart strangely warmed, and in a new way came to know the love of God. Still others of us won't even get the moment of warmth, we will just realise that through scripture, tradition, reason and our own experiences, that the gospel is good news for us and we are convinced by Jesus deep down, inexplicably.

So however we come to believe, we can accept the experiences of others as different from us but still real. We can be convinced by our experiences or by the bible, or the many centuries of Christians who have gone before us and sacrificed so much, or because the habit of church attendance began to make sense. The Lord works in many and various ways in our lives, God loves us each perfectly, even those of us who like Thomas need a bit more convincing than others, and God longs for us to be like those first disciples, relying on each other for support and sharing with one another the difficulties as well as the joys of living this Christian life.