

Easter 2 John 20:19-31

Today is the last day of the feast of Easter, we remain in the season of Easter for a number of weeks yet but the 8 days, or the octave as it is traditionally known, that runs from Easter day to the Sunday after it is all of equal importance in Church terms and would have seen an eight day period of feasting to contrast with the 6 weeks of Lenten fasting that preceded it. Hopefully you have kept the feast of Easter in some way, perhaps you have managed to last the whole week with a feast of chocolate eggs.

This closing Sunday of the octave is known as low Sunday, and although there are various suspected explanations as to why today bears this name, it cannot be denied that there is a low feeling that we have after the euphoria of Easter. It is just a reality that we cannot constantly remain in a state of heightened excitement, we simply lack the energy to do that, so for many, low Sunday is about when the excitement of Easter wears off and our readings, particularly our gospel reading, reminds us that the disciples were not yet publicly preaching the resurrection of Jesus, although they were witnesses to the resurrection, they were still locked away in a room, fearful of the consequences of this miracle.

The basis for our Christian understanding of God's love and the living out of that understanding stems from the resurrection encounters like the one we just heard from John's gospel. This description begins on the same day, which day? Well the day when the women went to the tomb to tend to Jesus' body, Easter day. Mary has seen Jesus and told the disciples but they are not persuaded to leave the room, in fact it is reasonable to assume that they don't really believe her. She is a woman, as such her society says she is not a reliable witness, she would have been unable to testify in court under the law of the land and in any case she was tired, emotional, delusional, how many of us, in those circumstances, would have believed her either? So Jesus appeared among them, behind locked doors, he was suddenly just there. He was not visible to one person this time, where he could be mistaken for a hallucination, now he was stood amongst at least 10 people, the disciples remaining after Judas' death and with Thomas out. Jesus doesn't just come to be seen, he also gives the disciples a task and a ministry, he tells them to receive the Holy Spirit and to forgive or retain sins of those to whom they minister.

Thomas comes back to a room of bemused but elated disciples, they have seen the Lord, but they are still behind the locked door, but Thomas is unwilling to believe on their testimony. Not only does the story remain beyond belief to Thomas, he's probably feeling a bit left out and defensive, why did the Lord come when he was out, why didn't he wait until everyone was there, he can perform a miracle as great as resurrection surely he can make sure everyone is together before he shows himself? And for a week this unsettling is allowed to continue, Thomas more and more alone in his position and the other disciples increasingly confused about what they saw and experienced, yet why they have only seen it once, and still they are in hiding.

Of course, nothing is pure coincidence, no action of Jesus is for nothing, the manner of his appearing to the disciples in two parts served to show one thing, spoken testimony alone would not be enough to convince people. Jesus' death and resurrection is illogical and on the face of it unbelievable. There was no earthly benefit to going along with it and there still isn't today, society at large is generally unconcerned with Christianity, and in some parts it is openly hostile to it, we get no earthly perks from professing our faith. The same went for Jesus' disciples at the time of his ministry. Their lives would have been safer if one of them could have come up with a theory of where the body was, then the evidence could have been presented to the authorities and the disciples might have been able to go back to their own lives and families, but the reality was they didn't have the body, their experience told them that however impossible it seemed, their experience was that Jesus was alive and amongst them. That the 10 could not convince Thomas on their testimony alone was a sign that people throughout the ages would be closed to the good news, they would need more than logic to bring them to Christ.

That explains why the early church lived out their message of love to one another and to the wider society. They didn't wander the streets preaching and coming up with logical proofs that the impossible actually occurred, they lived in the knowledge they had come to obtain that God loves humanity and the Jesus was the logos, God's word made flesh. That Gospel, that good news, caused joyful people to come together and live lives of faith where all were valued and taken care of and where making mistakes, falling into sin, was no longer a curse against the sinner, but rather an admission of human weakness and an opportunity to approach God for forgiveness in order that each can learn and grow through the experiences of life.

That good news hasn't changed, God loves you as you are, as God values each member of humanity, so must we, as God does not pick a favourite child, neither can we pick and choose our brothers and sisters in Christ, or our family or our neighbours, all are humans created in the image of God and equally valuable in God's sight. We can make mistakes and know that is not a barrier to us coming to God, in fact recognising our shortcomings is the very reason to come to God in faith. May we display the faith of those first Christians and live lives worthy of God because of it.