24 April 2022 John 20:19-31 2 Easter Pastor Pearce

Let's start with the last words from today's reading: **Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written *so that you may come to believe* that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing *you may have life in his name*.**
Sometimes we can have the idea that the Gospels
Are like biographies of Jesus, but then we hear words like these
And we are reminded that the evangelists didn't write
To give us a biographer's evaluation of Jesus' life,
(they don't even say what Jesus looked like),
Rather, they wrote as people proclaiming the *Good News* about Jesus:
They wrote down the message that brings us to faith in Jesus
So that we may share in his resurrected life.

Today I'm going to proclaim Good News from the Gospel,
First of all that Jesus in his resurrection brings us peace from God.
Then I'll talk about how it is safe for us,
As members of the Christian community, to express doubt.
Then I'll draw your attention to the way
That the greatest confessions of faith
Can come in the gathered community
Even from those who have struggled most with doubt.

OK, let's start with the way the Jesus, in his resurrection,
Brings us peace with God.
Listen to these words: **When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'**
It's the first day of the week: the first Easter Sunday.
The disciples, who are, of course, all Jewish,
Are evidently fearful of the Jewish authorities,
And so they are gathered behind locked doors.

But Jesus comes into their midst and the very first words
That he proclaims to them are: **Peace be with you.**
He does not scold them or rebuke them or condemn them,
But speaks to them a word of peace from God
To move them from *fear* to *joy*.

One of the distinctive features of the resurrection accounts
Is that people don't immediately recognise Jesus
When they see him: so Mary, who thinks Jesus is the gardener,
Only recognises Jesus when she is *called by name*.
Likewise, the disciples on the road to Emmaus
Only recognise Jesus in *the breaking of the bread*.
In today's reading, it is only when Jesus shows them his hands and side
That they properly see who he is.
This is how the text reads: **After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. *Then* the disciples rejoiced *when they saw the Lord*.**
It's after this act of recognition
That Jesus then commissions his disciples: **Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'**
In his resurrection Jesus speaks his word of peace,
And gives his church the authority to forgive sins.
Maybe you've wondered why pastors draw attention
To the authority the church has to forgive sins,
Well, today's reading is one of the texts we use to teach about this.
In his resurrection Jesus spoke his word of peace,
And it's a word of peace to you as well:
Listen to the word of forgiveness spoken to you in Jesus' name,
Trust that what Jesus says is true,
And the same resurrection peace is yours.
John wrote this Gospel so that you may come to this faith,
And receive the gift of this faith and life.

Of course, in the narrative not everyone believes,
And this brings us to the second point of the sermon,
And that is as members of the Christian community
It is safe for us to express doubt.
Listen to God's word: **But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'**
Think about what is happening here:
Thomas is vehemently rejecting the testimony of the other disciples:
He will not believe on the basis of what they say they have seen.
This 'will not' could be translated 'will *never*':
Thomas says he will never believe
Unless he has not only his own *visual* proof,
But also his own *tactile* proof of the resurrection of Jesus.

Now the other disciples could have taken great offence at this,
After all, Thomas is as good as calling them liars,
Or at the very least suggesting that they are somehow deluded.
But it is evident that they do not condemn him for voicing doubts,
Even doubts voiced is such strong and offensive language,
Rather they maintain their unity with Thomas:
They do not reject him or exclude him or denounce him.
And Thomas, for all his voicing of doubt,
Maintains his unity with them.
How do we know this?
Because next Sunday he is with them:
His doubts have not stopped him meeting with them,
And his expression of these doubts
Have not stopped the other disciples welcoming him
As they meet together on the next Lord's Day,
On the next Sunday, one week after the day of the resurrection.

And this takes us to the third point: The greatest confessions of faith

Can come in the gathered community
Even from those who have struggled most with doubt.
Let's listen to how the narrative goes on: **A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them.**
It's Sunday, they are meeting together as God's people:
Those who have seen the risen Lord,
And Thomas, who has voiced his doubt.
Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'
The word of resurrection peace does not change
Because one who has confessed his doubts is now with them:
Jesus' word is not dependent for its power
On our belief or unbelief:
His word is trustworthy no matter
How confident or diffident we feel:
The Gospel does not call us to have faith in *faith*:
It is the *word of the living Lord Jesus* that moves us
From doubt to faith, from fear to joy,
And from death to life.

And now the focus narrows: **Then [Jesus] said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.'**
If you were directing a movie of this scene,
How would you depict it?
Would you have Thomas reaching out his hand
And putting it in Jesus' side or not?
At least in my reading, the text leaves this as an open question,
And one for us to meditate on.

What we *know* is that Jesus appears to Thomas
That he speaks his word of peace to him,
That he speaks words that move him from doubt to belief.
And all this happens as Thomas, for all his stated doubt,
Perseveres in meeting with God's people

In community, on a Sunday.
It is in Christian community, on a Sunday,
That Thomas encounters the risen Lord Jesus,
And that he gives one of the greatest confessions,
If not the greatest confession of who Jesus is: **Thomas answered [Jesus], 'My Lord and my God!'**
The other disciples had simply confessed to Thomas
That they had seen this risen Lord.
It is Thomas who makes the great Christian confession of faith,
That Jesus, the Word made flesh, is our God.

The risen Lord Jesus then speaks words that are of comfort to us,
Who have not witnessed the risen Christ,
But who confess his resurrection as we meet together
Sunday by Sunday here at Bethlehem.
Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, listen to what our Lord says to us:
He proclaims that we, who have not seen,
But who have come to believe on the basis of apostolic testimony,
He proclaims that we are blessed of God, and the evangelist proclaims
That we, through faith in Christ, have life in is name.

For the last two thousand years Christians have been meeting together
On the first day of the week, on the day of the resurrection.
We have met together in fear, in doubt,
To receive the word of the Lord to us,
To hear the voice of the risen Christ as we listen to the words
Written to bring us to belief, and to life.
So let us welcome each other in our doubts and fears,
And together attend to the word of our Lord,
So that we may be bound together in our confession of Jesus as Lord,
And so that, in receiving God's love in Jesus,
We too may love to each other. In Jesus' name. Amen.