

Sermon

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In most of the churches that I've served in there haven't always been children's groups and there certainly aren't any children's groups happening at the moment. So one of the things that I have often done is thought of a challenge, something that the children can do during the sermon slot, or something that they can take home and do throughout the week and then bring back and show to everybody the following week. Now we're tending to think about being shut in our homes at the moment, and not being able to go to God's home, or to go to church, the place where we would expect to meet with God, but what if like in this story, God was suddenly here in our home? Would it look different? Would we do things differently? Where might Jesus be in your home? So I decided this week that I would encourage the children to make paper models of Jesus (Miriam's hiding behind hers now!) and then to ask them if they could rise to the challenge of surprising us with those little models of Jesus by making Jesus appear in the most unexpected and funny places in our home throughout the week. We'll see what happens and perhaps I'll share some photographs on Twitter!

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In the name of the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I wonder what sort of Easter you have had this year? Certainly, a very different Easter to any you've ever had before. For many of us Easter has been an Easter full of worry, uncertainty and fear. I've spent much of the last two weeks keeping watch at home with a member of our congregation in intensive care on a ventilator, with no certainties about what the next day (or even the next hour) might bring. Easter is supposed to be a celebration of resurrection joy. But many of us have felt we're still waiting for the celebration to start. When do we get to the joy of Easter when we still feel like we're living in the shadow of the cross?

I wonder if Thomas was feeling a bit like that too? He seems to arrive late to Easter, when the rest of the disciples have already started to celebrate. I don't think that Thomas is some sort of sceptic, with intellectual doubts. He's someone who has been through deeply traumatic events that he's still trying to work through.

He's seen his Master betrayed, tortured, and executed. He's seen all the hopes and dreams he's nurtured over the last three years torn apart. He's gone from feeling like the revolution is about to happen to wondering if the next knock on the door will be the Temple police trying to drag him away. It's no wonder that his response to stories of resurrection is scornfully dismissive. Thomas's heart can't cope with that level of hope right now. It's full of grief, guilt, fear and regret about what has happened and his role in it. All the things he didn't do when he could, all the decisions he's made that he's now left second-guessing.

In some ways we are all of us, all of us going through an experience that is traumatic. Many of us are coping with fears for our own future, regrets about past choices that we have no choice but to live with, grief for a 'normal' life that now seems impossible to return to, and

probably guilt that we haven't managed to be the stronger, kinder, more capable people we'd thought we were. Perhaps right now we can empathise with where Thomas was when the risen Jesus came to find him.

Because Jesus did come to find him. If you don't remember anything else from this story – remember that. Jesus came to find Thomas when he was lost, and doubtful and traumatised. When he was so afraid that he was getting angry with the people trying to give him hope. There was no need for Jesus to be there. The resurrection had already been revealed to Mary and the other disciples. We might think that one angry sceptical man didn't necessarily warrant his own resurrection appearance. Jesus thought otherwise. Because Thomas mattered to Jesus. Because all the Thomas's matter. None of Thomas's doubts or failures or fears or insecurities made him someone that Jesus wouldn't be there for, that Jesus couldn't love. And that's still true today for all of us, who feel overwhelmed by our own fears and failings. It doesn't matter how overwhelmed or guilty we are. Jesus still comes to find us.

How does Jesus meet us? How did he meet Thomas and the other disciples? There was one thing that he kept saying to them – he says it three times in our reading: 'Peace be with you'. He keeps saying it until the disciples can take in what he's saying. On the one level it was just a normal conventional greeting that people would give to each other when they met. But clearly there's more to it than that, or why make a point of repeating it? Perhaps the point is that 'peace' was not what any of them were feeling. 'Peace' felt like something from back before Maundy Thursday. Back before the world changed. Back when things were normal.

I wonder if that's where many of us find ourselves now? We yearn for the Easter of last year, the normal Easter. A service in church. A holiday. Time spent with extended family. The things that now seem impossible. But Easter was never supposed to be a season for carrying on as normal, Easter is always about glimpsing how things could be different. Jesus wants more for us than a return to the normality of yesterday. Jesus wants us to step into the opportunity of a different tomorrow.

There is something profoundly creative about the brokenness of where we find ourselves right now, as individuals, as a church, as a nation, and as a world. The realisation that normality is impossible. The realisation that we are not the people that we thought we were and that the society we live in is far more unjust than we'd ever allowed ourselves to notice. The realisation that the dreams we were nurturing will never be fulfilled, in part because fulfilling them would damage our planet or other people. It's scary. It leaves us all feeling vulnerable. But it also leaves us able to imagine something different. And it's why we need peace. Not to lull us back into a comfortable nostalgia for the way things were. But to allow us to step into the way things could be. Because things could be better than they were. We could be better than we were. The Risen Christ comes to call us into that better future, to call us to be the people we should be, not the people we had let ourselves get used to being. When Jesus comes to find the disciples, and he meets this bunch of scared, doubting, guilty and angry people, his words to them are, 'Peace be with you'. And then he breathes his Spirit on them. Jesus comforts, inspires and empowers his church to be a people who, in the light of the resurrection, change the world. He does this, meeting them where they are – in the shadow of the cross, behind closed doors, in their homes. From there the resurrection changes everything.

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Peace be with you.

Amen.