

SERMON

'Known in Doubt'

Rev Jessica Smith, Curate at St Francis of Assisi Church, Strood

It was evening, the end of an extraordinary day and we had gathered in our room with all the doors locked. We were still afraid, afraid the leaders might come and get us, arrest us, beat us, kill us – as they had done to Jesus. And we were talking together, endlessly, about what the women had told us that morning. They said they had actually seen Jesus. That he was alive. But we saw him die. And dead men don't rise. It's impossible.

Suddenly, I looked up and saw... Jesus. It was really Jesus. My heart was beating fast, very fast. How could he have got in, when the doors were locked? How could he be standing there, when he was dead? "Peace be with you," he said, in that gentle yet firm voice we knew so well. Then he showed us the wounds in his hands and side, and then he asked us for something to eat. He was real, solid and somehow, in a way my mind was struggling to understand, he was right back here with us.

Thomas was not with us that night. When we told him what had happened, he didn't believe us. He needed to see for himself. Well, I sort of understood that. By the middle of the week, I was starting to doubt too. Jesus had seemed real enough, but we'd only seen him for a matter of minutes, and he was gone. What was going on? My heart longed for it to be true, but my mind was still struggling to understand.

A week after that first time, we were all together again – Thomas too. And then... it happened again. Jesus was there, standing among us – real, solid and right back with us. Again, in his gentle, firm voice, he said "Peace be with you." Then he looked Thomas straight in the eye. "Look – here are my hands. Touch me – touch the wound in my side. Don't doubt any longer... believe!"

Thomas fell on his knees before Jesus. "My Lord and my God," he said. Then Jesus looked around at all of us standing there, astonished. "Do you believe because you have seen me?" he asked. "Blessed are those who have not seen, and still believe."

I wonder what your favourite part of this story is?

Theo: Probably the bit where they gathered in the room.

Nathan: When Jesus was still alive and they were shocked.

Jayden: When Jesus said "Peace be unto you"

Anouka: My favourite part is where Jesus came back to life even though he died on the cross.

I wonder what the most important part of this story is?

Theo: The part where Thomas fell on the ground and couldn't touch Jesus because he was really disappointed with himself.

Anouka: Thomas saw Jesus in the house because first he didn't believe Jesus came back to life and now Jesus has shown himself.

Nathan: That Jesus was always by his disciples' side, which always made his disciples always believe in him.

Jayden: When Jesus showed everybody his wounds.

I wonder what we learn about Jesus from this story?

Jayden: That Jesus will always be with us.

Theo: We can do things but he'll forgive us no matter what.

Anouka: Even if we don't believe, Jesus will try his best to make us believe.

Nathan: Jesus will always protect us and, no matter what, we will always be safe whenever he is with us.

I wonder what we learn about us from this story?

Nathan: We will always have doubts.

Jayden: That we can be tempted.

Theo: Probably that we can get a bit disappointed with ourselves sometimes.

Anouka: That some people won't judge if they're right or wrong unless they are proven.

I wonder if there's anything we need to do after hearing this story?

Theo: We should forgive people for anything they do wrong and don't get angry with them if they do things that are wrong.

Nathan: I have learnt that Jesus will always help us when we're stuck in situations.

Jayden: I learnt that we should always believe in Jesus.

Anouka: I think sometimes we just need to trust God and believe him, even if we have no sense of what we're doing.

My favourite part of this story is the way the second appearance of Jesus to those gathered disciples so perfectly mirrors his first, a week earlier. The disciples are together. The doors are locked. Jesus comes, stands among them and says, "May peace be with you!" It got me thinking – maybe Thomas was not the only disciple who doubted. After all, recent events had turned all the disciples' worlds upside down. Maybe the other disciples also needed to see again the risen Jesus, to prove to themselves that the previous week had not just been a dream. So, Thomas becomes not the unique doubter, but the disciple who dared to be real, to say what everybody was thinking.

One of the joys of this lockdown for me has been working with our children, whom you have just heard from, in our online Sunday School. Because, as you will know if you have ever worked with children, children are always real. Our children recognise the shock and amazement of those gathered disciples. They recognise the doubts we hold, the temptations we face, the disappointment we sometimes feel in our own lack of faith. But they also recognise the real presence of the risen Jesus in this story: Jesus who comes speaking peace to his shattered disciples, Jesus who forgives, Jesus who will always be with us, who will help us as we take our faltering steps towards believing.

Like those early disciples, our worlds have been turned upside down this year. Like theirs, our minds may be stretching, struggling to understand this "new normal" we are now tentatively entering. We need not be afraid to bring our doubts and uncertainties, our disappointments and anxieties into the presence of the risen Jesus. For, in fact, he is already there; he comes speaking peace into our turmoil; he comes, our Lord and our God.

Amen.