

Coming to Believe

Second Sunday of Easter, 27th April 2025

St Leonard's Denmark, Alison Kershaw

John 12.1-8, Rev 1.4-8

Through the written word and the spoken word may we know your Living Word, Jesus Christ our Saviour, Amen

We have journeyed through Lent and joyfully celebrated Easter. But here with the story that is told every year on the Sunday after Easter – the story of Thomas' need to see and feel the wounds of the risen Jesus before he can believe the witness of the others - we are already made aware that we have not reached the end point of our journey – that there is a certain amount of accepting and processing of the good news that now needs to take place – and that perhaps this is a journey that has no end. Our Lent study led by Revd. Sue this year was titled *The Path of Descent* – so I guess we are now on the *Path of Ascent* – which is arguably harder. I find walking up hillsides harder on the lungs, though walking downhill harder on the knees – so I guess each path has its challenges.

The descent, in a spiritual sense, can involve going deeply inwards and embracing the dark. For some of us of a melancholic and introspective bent, Lent can come as a very welcome invitation, but we are now called to step outside into the light and get our lungs and hearts pumping to do our part in the new creation. 'As the Father sent me, so I send you' (John 20.21) the risen Christ tells the disciples – echoing his teaching at the last supper - "the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father." (John 14.12)

Before the ascent, however, is the seismic movement of belief in resurrection that motivates us for the climb. In our sacred story the resurrected Christ ascends to heaven after a period of walking the earth and appearing to his beloved disciples in various places and times. This is a challenge for many of us – both intellectually and often emotionally. A few years ago, my then four-year-old grandson piped up from the back seat of the car– 'Nanna?' – I braced myself for yet another in a stream of questions – 'is Jesus alive?' 'Yes,' I said, but sensing I was falling into a trap – 'then where is he?' Well, how do you answer that one – and in such a way that a four-year-old might understand – did I even know the answer myself – or did I know something on one level and be totally stuck for words on another? If I am honest, I feel the truth of resurrection far more surely than I can talk about it – so bear with me this morning.

It is perhaps easier to think about the ascended Christ being everywhere – the cosmic Christ that we do not see as an individual, but do see incarnate in all things– the one described in Revelations as the Alpha and Omega – the One "who is and who was and who is to come" (Rev. 1.4-8) – than the newly risen Jesus that enters through locked doors and shows his wounds.

Though he has been stuck with the title Doubting Thomas, Thomas was not the only one to resist believing that Jesus had risen. In Luke's gospel, the women – Mary Magdalene, Joanna, mother Mary and 'the other women with them' were not believed when they returned from the empty tomb and relayed the words of the angels they encountered there: "Remember how he told you, while he was in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." The men batted away the women's account - "these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them." (Luke 24.1-12) In the longer ending of Mark's Gospel, the risen Christ appears to Mary Magdalene who "told those who had been with him while they were mourning and weeping" but "they would not believe it." (Mark 16.9) Nor, according to Mark, did they believe the two disciples who encountered him while walking in the country. (Mark 16.12) In Luke's expanded story of the encounter on the road to Emmaus, the two are "slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared" and do not recognise Jesus until they break bread together. The confirmation is experienced not as something believed with the eyes but in the heart: "were our hearts not burning within us?" (Luke 24:13-35)

In John's resurrection story, Mary Magdalene is the first to see the empty tomb – Simon Peter and the other disciple whom Jesus loved need to see for themselves – but do not understand what they see. Mary alone stays and encounters the risen Christ who she at first does not recognise and mistakes for the gardener. John does not say whether the disciples believed her when she went, as Christ asked her, and said "I have seen the Lord." But

the fact they have locked themselves away in fear suggests they are not altogether convinced. The ten gathered in the locked room only came to believe because Jesus stood among them and showed them his hands and side.

Thomas was therefore no different in not believing the word of others, or those who did not recognise Jesus at first. Thomas in this moment between hearing and disbelieving and seeing and believing – is representative of them all – and of us. John directs his message to all generations to come “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet come to believe.” As though speaking directly to us in this room, John says there were many other signs of proof that Jesus gave to his disciples, “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.”

So here we are - two millennia later– reading and hearing this written word to help us ‘come to believe.’ This is, I venture to say, both a wonder and a dilemma – for we have various ways of reading and interpreting scripture, and for many of us the line between the mystery encapsulated in sacred story-telling, and historical fact is a shifting one. But while this is an important and interesting question, perhaps we ultimately ‘come to believe’ because of the way our hearts burn within us when we hear again these ancient words, however we approach them, and allow the story to go to work within us. We might come to believe as we recognise in the accounts of Mary, the two on the road, and Thomas, our own encounter with the risen Christ.

Belief is not simply a question of intellectual apprehension and decision-making, but of experience. I am drawn to the expression ‘come to believe’ because it suggests a lot more than simply subscribing to a belief and upends the approach that says just believe this and you’ll be saved. Coming to belief is different to blind faith - it implies a process, a journey, a ‘path of ascent.’ Coming to belief involves experience – even if we can no longer see and touch Christ’s wounds in a physical sense, we can come to feel and know them, we can encounter the risen and wounded Christ in others and ourselves.

There are so many ways to come to belief. We might come to belief through ritual. If we engage fully with it, we move beyond symbolism to creating community, birthing hope, healing wounds and making what is broken whole again. Through weaving palm crosses, foot washing, Good Friday observance, spring cleaning of our church and adorning it with fresh flowers and leaves of glorious colour, the dawn fire and sharing of the light of Christ amongst those gathered in a dark church, cracking open easter eggs, singing loud alleluias, and sharing bread – through all these rituals we are remembering in the deepest sense of that word – not only recalling but embodying resurrection – making it real. Moving beyond ritual, we might come to belief by our actions that manifest resurrection hope, reconciliation and love in our relationships, communities and in service of a stressed creation.

And we might come to belief by recognising the wounded Christ - in the wounds of creation, in the wounds of others, and our own wounds – wounds inflicted by others who are broken, blind, or twisted - wounds inflicted by ourselves. It is not surprising, given the great challenges of our lives and the state of the world, if we come to doubt the happy ending of our gospels in the face of all this. Perhaps it is when we come face to face with grief and despair that we truly see, and touch the wounds in the hands, feet and side, of God’s Beloved. The risen Christ is not restored to a perfect form but carries open wounds. The wounded Christ gathers up the cruelty that inflicted those wounds, gathers up all our wounds and sorrows and transforms them. Ours scars are a part of us – our battle wounds – and though we have new life, we still carry them as marks of experience, and signs that what was once broken can be healed and forgiven. Wounds can open us to understanding and touching the ground of our being – as can profound joy. Our sacred story encompasses both – the grief, fear and despair of Jesus’ followers, and their great rejoicing at the restoration of hope.

And we might come to belief through the experience of serenity and reassurance settling into our hearts as the storms of life rage around us. The risen Christ penetrates the walls of fear and hurt and grief to stand among us, and breath the Holy Spirit upon us. Three times in John’s account of the locked room, Jesus says “Peace be with you.” This peace is also something we can offer one another in words of greeting, comfort and blessing, and in the breath of our loving presence. This spirit bids us to tend our wounds, leave our hiding place, and go out into the daylight to begin our path of ascent. So as we go, again we say, Peace be with you.