

BIBLE STUDY 9 John 20:19-31

Why is it called *Low Sunday*? The *Chreasters* (Christmas and Easter attendees) mayn't be seen again until December, so the congregation is *low*. The beautiful special Easter singing (thankyou, Choir,) and the special Easter smells and bells and fire (thankyou, Brian,) may be less, and even chockie eggs are reduced by 75%. We are now walking in Easter faith, through more pot-holes of shattered dreams and human weakness than *alleluias* and the air has been somewhat let out of our Easter balloon, but take two points to heart. Today, we meet Thomas the Twin, a human more like us than we might wish. Secondly, the Easter season will lead us to the pneumatic coming of the Holy Spirit of Jesus at Pentecost to inflate us full once again.

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In today's Gospel, the disciples should be partying in triumph as emboldened Easter people, prancing about and screaming "Jesus is alive, alleluia." Mary of Magdala had sprinted from the tomb with eyewitness news to alert the disciples of Jesus' resurrection. The men had trumpeted at her delighted incoherency about an empty tomb and a vision of angels and that Risen Jesus called her by name. The men comforted themselves that she was ranting "an idle tale." (Luke 24:11) Peter called it "hysterical female nonsense." These craven, jelly-livered anti-heroes cower, huddled together; they have locked themselves into a living nightmare in a fear-chosen tomb behind bolted doors. They are frightened, flinching at every footstep. They know now that anyone who threatens the power of the state will get crucified and the state wrath will seek out the leader's followers as well. They felt that the ones responsible for Jesus' death were very likely looking for his disciples now. They fear they may be next and wait for the executioner's knock. They are locked in a bolted room that mirrors their fears and provides no exit for them. They had invested so much in one who may be a failure; they gave away their jobs and left everything to follow him and now he was gone. They have suffered a dizzying week of events, an emotional roller-coaster ride: Palm Sunday, *elation*, God's/Good Friday, *deflation*, Easter Day (at least for the women) *elation*, Easter evening, *deflation* into fear. Rabbi Jesus had died a horrible death after a mockery of justice, and hence, psychologically, his followers are in a mess in a turbulent, scary time. Thus, they entombed themselves in darkness and did not let in the daylight of Easter hope.

Our God chose to sacrifice God's stainless perfection and happiness to come to planet Earth. God, being God, could not avoid our existence and leave us forlorn, but plunged into our guilt and pain and would feel the full venomous force of human destructiveness. Forever, this Saviour bears the scars of triumph, "by his stripes we are healed." (Isa.53:5) When let down by his disciples, Risen Jesus could still not leave humanity's open wounds suppurating, but had to come back to help us work on our wounds to make them glorious.

Suddenly, for all their defensiveness, a murdered Messiah, a tomb-breaker come back to life, affrights them in their safe house to debunk death. They must have squirmed in embarrassing ashamed silence; they must have gone "Phew! He's still talking to us after our spineless desertion of him when he needed us most." Risen Jesus was no hallucination, no insubstantial spirit or spectre, no "ghoulie nor ghostie nor...thing that goes bump in the night." He was the Jesus they knew and was in good shape, but bearing the marks of grievous wounds. To identify himself, the wounded Christ was like a post-op patient. He showed his disfiguring incisions, the scars of execution, which

no longer gaped or bled. Sensing their profound remorse at their panicking ignorance and infidelity, he did not scold them, nor chew them out, "How could you abandon me?" nor does he give a pep talk about how it's all OK. As he shows them his pain, he links pain with gaining peace of mind, peace of conscience, peace of soul; the price of following him will be costly. He adds "Peace be with you," to move them beyond their failure, to have them exit from paralysing fear and the upper room and to encourage them to a fresh beginning in a new life. Colossians has the phrase, "Jesus chose to reconcile the whole universe to himself through the shedding of his blood upon the cross." (Col. 1:20) He comes to show that everything is now at peace because of those holy and precious wounds.

Then he breathed on them his Holy Spirit-life, commissioning them for mission to go into the world bearing the Good News. "Go! As the Father sent me, so I send you as the fledgling Church to breathe on others to set them free and change fear into freedom." This was the Spirit that God breathed into the nostrils of human dust with Adam to bring him to life. (Gen.2:7) This was the prophetic breath of God in the vision of Ezekiel in the Valley of dead Dry Bones, (Ezek.37:9-10) Now Risen Jesus, the Loving one, breathes his Holy Spirit-life on the disheartened disciples to empower them for mission.

But they did not stir. They were so still locked into their fear, they could not move from timidity to boldness, not until the cyclonic force of Pentecost will give them enthusiasm and authority in fifty days' time. This is not a good way for a new church community to get started, nothing going on, nothing getting out, a sure recipe for church death. Closed doors mean closed hearts, and closed hearts mean a closed kingdom. Jesus set them free so they can set others free, but none move out to heal or preach or feed the hungry as Jesus asked them. They choose to remain as an unhatched chick and stay safe inside the shell of the upper room.

Thomas had had to get away alone to grieve the loss of his friend Jesus. He had plunged into utter spiritual darkness at Christ's failure. He felt guilt at not having somehow stopped the execution. He was left with a pain he believed would never go away. His big mistake was to brood alone and not seek support. Thus, he had missed the incredible thrill of first Easter; his friends had not twittered nor texted him to come when Jesus first came. When Thomas returned to the fearful community, they were just beginning to find post-resurrection joy and gushed, "Jesus was right here, just as he had been before." Melancholic Thomas blurted from his deep void of despair "Mary of Magdala can prattle till the cows come home; you deluded disciples can tattle-tale about a dead Jesus appearing to you through bolted doors. You're all deluded! You all saw him dragged away to be slain, you saw him dead, wrapped up and placed in a tomb. You're hallucinating on magic mushrooms or you're having a sick joke at my expense. You've been locked in here so long, you've got claustrophobia or cabin fever. Some guy called Freud will have a field-day with the likes of you in a couple of millennia." His insistent honesty was more important than following his mates and made him doubt. Thomas may wish to believe; he may yearn to accept as true what the others say, but his wish cannot yet struggle into faith. He was too honest to pretend nor make believe. He planted his two feet firmly on the ground and shouted out his doggedly unbelieving conditions, "I won't believe unless I can put my finger in the holes in Jesus' warm, wounded flesh; I want to feel the physical proof." Thomas was the real wounded one, his mind darkened by doubt and depression, his heart broken by grief. Jesus will have to touch his wounds to make him whole again. The human heart can be healed by the touch of another human being, who had been wounded. Are we ever as stubborn? "I will not believe that my doctor's decision is final. I need a second or third opinion."

Thomas was no wuss. When Jesus was summoned to the ill Lazarus, Thomas knew the way was fraught with danger. Bethany was a short distance from where the hostiles were waiting in Jerusalem. "Rabbi," cried John, "the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and you are going there again?" Courageously, Thomas expected the worst, "Let us also go that we may die with him." (John 11:16) Thomas was always practical; he asked the questions that others had in their minds but were too afraid to say out loud and would not accept blindly without questioning. At the Last supper, Jesus urged the disciples to "Trust in God and trust also in me...You know the way to the place I am going?" Thomas processed the statement and alone had the gumption to interrupt Jesus, "Lord, we do not know *where* you are going...How can we know the way?" (John 14:5)

Risen Jesus let Thomas have time for a cup of tea, a Bex and a good lie down, then, like the Good Shepherd, came in search of the one lost sheep, Jesus buttonholed the doubter. He had on show the wounds suffered in defending his flock from the wolves. "Tommy, I hear you didn't believe the others and demanded to touch the indelible scars of Calvary's cost. "But Lord," cried Thomas, their words sounded incredible; they seemed given to mass hysteria." "Come here, Tommy. Touch my wounds. Feel life." Thomas replied, "No, *I don't need to. I can see you.*" Jesus replied, "Do you only believe when you can see? Blessed are those *who have not seen* yet believe." The Seventeenth Century artist Caravaggio has Jesus grip Thomas' grubby finger and guide it into the spear-loosened flesh, where his fingers read the Braille-like markings. Thomas moves from a heart full of doubt to a heart full of re-born faith to declare "My Lord and my God." In this life-changing moment for Thomas, his black-dog despair has disappeared; his darkness has been dispelled. He had used his doubts constructively to sort out his thinking; he has moved from honest doubt to deeper honest faith. Now, he commits his life to proclaim the Gospel of the dying and rising Jesus.

In *The Sound of Music*, the Mother Abbess says "I always try to *keep faith in my doubts.*" She was reflecting the story of the Chosen People. In the Hebrew Scriptures, people often questioned God's closeness, presence, faithfulness *without giving up* on faith. Often, they hurled their doubts to the heavens. Jesus gasped a psalm of lament filled with faith in his abandonment on the Cross: "My God. My God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?" (Psalm 22:1) if, like Mother Superior, we try to keep faith in our doubts, if we remain open to belief and are never a closed person, then a blessing will be ours.

Here we are as a parish; some of us have wounds, yet we are living in the potential freedom and joy of resurrection. We must dare to risk stepping outside our locked doors to answer our commission to mission to breathe new ideas and new life and Good News into anything lifeless with possibilities for adaptation and renewal. Where can we see the Risen One, hear him, touch him? The tangible evidence of the Risen Christ, which Thomas sought, is here in Sunday church, as we baptized and reconciled Christians gather to find his presence in song and word and sacrament. As we take the blessed bread and wine and say "My Lord and my God," we promise to reach out to hold onto anyone still paralysed by fear of change. Then we will take the Word, the wafer and the wine outside Eucharist to touch those in human hurt or need, to help them find resurrected freedom and joy in the coming week. People will know that Jesus is alive if they encounter him in our lives. Then, there will be Easter elation after all on Low Sunday. Now, how good is that? Alleluia. Amen.