

Have You Seen? John 20: 19 – 31

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, we pray that these words will speak to us here today, and will serve to glorify your name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

If I had been asked to write an account of the resurrection of Christ, I think I would have begun differently – maybe it would have gone something like this.

When John returned from the empty tomb, he ran up to Peter waving his arms about and shouting excitedly. Peter took John by the shoulders to calm him down and said:

“Chill out John, what’s bugging you?”

“Peter, I’ve got some good news – and I’ve got some bad news.”

”OK! what’s the good news?”

“The good news is that Jesus has done a runner – yes, he’s done a runner. He’s not in the tomb, he’s risen just like he said he would”.

“That’s brill John, but – what’s the bad news?”

Looking around cautiously, John said, “He’s really up-tight about what you said in the courtyard last Friday – denying that you’ve been hanging out with him!”

No – it doesn’t work for me either – think I should give Bible writing a miss. But let’s take a closer look at today’s gospel reading – and we’ll stay with the version we’ve just heard Gill read.

When Jesus was arrested, most of his disciples and followers abandoned him, they ran off in fear. Now, in the evening after the discovery of the empty tomb, what we now call the evening of Easter Sunday, they were gathered together in a state of panic, hiding behind locked doors. They were terrified that the Romans and the Jews would soon be coming to arrest them too. So, there they were, gathered together, trying to make sense of it all – when Jesus appeared and spoke to them. Just imagine how they must have felt!

I guess we have all had the experience of being deeply absorbed in a book, or intently working on a project of some sort, when someone approaches us and starts to speak. We may be quite startled, and perhaps a little annoyed too at our concentration being broken; but our response is nothing compared to how those gathered in the locked room must have felt when Jesus appeared and spoke to them. Imagine how you would feel if a deceased loved one appeared at your side and you heard him or her speak to you.

Now that is a scary thought – but we won’t dwell on it.

They were the closest friends of Jesus, and yet they deserted him when he needed them most. They probably expected him to reprimand them, he didn’t, instead he greeted them with the words “Shalom (alakeim) Aleichem”, which means “Peace be with you”. Then Jesus breathed on them, and in doing that he gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit – to comfort and guide them when he would no longer be with them.

But before Jesus left his disciples, he also gave them a command. The command was to forgive or retain sins in his name. Note that the disciples were not authorised to forgive sins in their own name, but in the name of Jesus Christ. This is the same command that every priest follows today when he or she absolves sins – it’s not in our own name, it’s in the name of Jesus Christ.

Our Gospel reading ends with the story of Thomas, who is also known as ‘Doubting Thomas’. He wasn’t with the other disciples when Jesus appeared to them on Easter Sunday evening. So, when he did meet up with them, he point-blank refused to believe them when they told him they had seen Jesus. He said that unless he could see for himself, putting his finger in the marks of the nails and his hand in Jesus’ side, he would not believe. That sounds terrible, but let’s be fair to Thomas, he’s no different to many of us today. Wouldn’t our faith be so much easier to follow if we could see a miracle or two performed in front of us? This story is probably the origin of the saying “Seeing is believing”.

One week after the first appearance, Thomas was with the other disciples when Jesus appeared again. How must Thgomas have felt when Jesus told him to put his finger in the wounds on his

hands, and to put his hand in Jesus' side. "Do not doubt but believe" Jesus said. Thomas must have been astounded! Not just at the sight of Jesus, but also that he knew exactly what Thomas had said to the other disciples when he doubted what they had told him. This was the moment when Thomas truly believed that Jesus was the Son of God and he made the declaration, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus responded, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

The offer by Jesus for Thomas to touch the crucifixion wounds is what led Thomas to his declaration of faith. Jesus gave Thomas what he needed – physical evidence. But the issue here is not about the doubt of Thomas, nor is it about seeing or touching Jesus. It's about confessing faith in Christ.

We are so much like Thomas. We want to see with our eyes and feel with our hands. We live in a "show me" society. However, not everything around us can be seen. We may not see Jesus standing among us; but that doesn't mean he isn't here! None of us can see our thoughts or ideas, but we know we have them because we see the impact they have on our lives and those around us.

In verse 29 of our Gospel reading Jesus said to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." These words are intended to reassure us and all future generations of believers that seeing Jesus is not a prerequisite for faith. It's not physical sight and signs that are decisive for faith – but the truth they reveal. The truth is that Jesus is the Son of God, and the evidence comes through the impact that his life and his work has on our lives.

I rather like an expression that I picked up while researching this sermon. It says that "Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith." "Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith." So, I guess that many of us have ants in our pants at some time or another – but not everyone. Numerous disciples of Christ were executed because they refused to deny the resurrection. Having had either first-hand experience of his resurrection, or heard the detail from trusted contemporaries, they fully believed that it did occur and were willing to die for that belief.

According to historical records, after Jesus' resurrection, he appeared alive to more than 500 people, on twelve separate occasions. All but one of the appearances occurred within the first 40-day period following Jesus' resurrection – that was before he ascended to be with his Father in heaven. However, the encounter with the risen Christ that has had the most influence on the Christian faith occurred after the Ascension. It was to Saul on the road to Damascus.

Saul was on a personal vendetta against the followers of Christ. In Acts ch 9 vs 1 - 2 we read:

"Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus so that if he found any that belonged to the 'Way', men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem."

On the road to Damascus, Saul saw a blinding light and heard the voice of Jesus saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

We don't have time today to look at the full story of Saul, but he became Paul, the person who took the message of Christ to the Gentiles, they are the non-Jews. And it was Paul who wrote most of the epistles, or letters in the New Testament. Paul too, was martyred for his faith. So, he went from arch-enemy of Christ's followers to become a founding member of the Christian church as we know it today. How much more evidence or inspiration do we need?

If we could have a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, surely that would remove any doubts we may have! Well, we can – every time we hear the Word of God, Jesus is here. Every time we experience a baptism, Jesus is here. Every time we receive the Eucharist, Holy Communion, Jesus is here. Through Word and Sacrament Jesus is with us saying, "Shalom (alakeim) Aleichem." Peace be with you.

Pause

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Amen.