



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

Come and see the risen Lord

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7 April 2013

John 20:19–31

¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’ ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Again Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’ ²² And with that he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.’ ²⁴ Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord!’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.’ ²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’ ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.’ ²⁸ Thomas said to him, ‘My Lord and my God!’ ²⁹ Then Jesus told him, ‘Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.’ ³⁰ Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

The closing two chapters of John’s gospel have similarities to the other gospels, as well as some differences. They begin with the discovery of the empty tomb and go on to show us the ministry of the Risen Christ toward the disciples.

John 20 has all the hallmarks of being the final chapter of the gospel: ‘Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.’ (John 20:30–31)

John 21 takes on a radically different feel; it tells of Jesus and the miraculous catch of fish ... and Jesus reinstating Peter by the lakeside.

‘Come and see’ originates in the first chapter of John, as Jesus calls the disciples to follow him. In fact, it is a call to John’s disciples to follow Jesus. Two people heard John talking about Jesus as the Lamb of God and they began to follow. After hearing of their desire to know where he was staying, Jesus’ invitation to the two was, ‘Come and you will see.’ The whole gospel explores what it means to come and see. There are two aspects to it, which have particular meaning when placed into the context of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and our understanding of how we can follow him:

- come—this means enabling, empowering a response ... something we do—and the power is given in the great invitation of Christ. The Risen Lord continues to invite us to see and to know

- see—this means ‘revealing’ of truth and a new kind of sight. One of John’s themes is light which has shone into the darkness and has never been extinguished. It is a light that penetrates our darkness.

When it came to the evening of Resurrection Day, fear caused the disciples to huddle together in the Upper Room for protection. The news of the empty tomb and the Lord’s resurrection had not yet transformed them in the way it soon would.

The Risen Lord appeared among them, breathed into them his Holy Spirit, and commissioned the disciples to extend his reconciling grace to all. It is interesting that, for John, it seems as though the resurrection, the ascension and Pentecost merge together into a single moment.

Thomas was not present, but was told that the Lord had appeared to them. Thomas would not believe without seeing the Lord personally and he went as far as to talk in terms of placing his hands in the wounds of Christ.

To see, you need at least to put yourself into a position to be able to see. Carol and I were at the Opera House, along with a huge crowd, to see a popular performer. Our seats, whilst not the poorest in the house, still made it difficult to engage with the stage performance. The theatre was full but we saw two better-placed seats nearby, empty throughout the supporting act. Our eyes locked on the two seats but you can imagine our disappointment when, just as the star was about to begin, the seats were filled.

We did our best to place ourselves in a position to see. We sought to make the best of the seats we had been allocated.

The Risen Lord demands that we position ourselves to be able to see all that he has to offer to us. It is possible to celebrate Easter and yet to miss the deepest truths which are offered to us. Things can happen around us—but their importance may not be recognised. This is especially true in a society which:

- promotes individuality, but does not necessarily enhance a sense of belonging
- bombards us with words, but does not explain the real meaning
- concentrates on image and confronts us with an increasing amount of branding, strap-lines and the icons of the 21st century
- is captivated by the moment and fails to really grasp the bigger picture.

In this season of Easter, I invite you to come and see the Risen Lord for yourself. Such an encounter will result in changed lives.

When Jesus appeared to the band of fearful disciples in the Upper Room, they must have been astounded at what they saw. They may well have felt like asking, ‘Jesus, is that really you?’ How could they really know for sure? Jesus showed them his hands and side.

The absence of Thomas is often related to the theme of doubt ... I have to say, I think rather unfairly. But we must be sure that we remain true to the scripture and not presume the things that are not written there for us.

‘Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came.’ (John 20:24)

This opens up a key number of verses that precede the purpose of John’s gospel. The question people fail to ask is ... Where was he? We can’t easily answer that question, but I believe it’s worth our consideration to use the Thomas account as a way into our own understanding of meeting the Risen Lord.

His absence could be explained by resistance

I recall being with a small group of Christians in a home group where each person was invited to conclude the sentence which began: 'I was there when ...' The stories that emerged from such an invitation were almost unbelievable. Not being present has serious consequences in life. Was it like that for Thomas, when the disciples told stories of meeting the Risen Lord?

- seeing is not helped by absence ... it is dangerous to weave full-blown character-types from scanty information and this is what people have done with Thomas ... his absence is as important as anything else
- we have an unfortunate typecast of Thomas. Raymond Brown draws our attention to 'unless' which he says people have considered to mean 'I'll never believe it'. Bruce Milne talks of unimaginative people who only act on what they hear or see
- a disposition of doubt can result in isolation and resistance ... the death of Jesus was such an overwhelming experience that led the disciples to really struggle with what was happening.

There are different kinds of absence which resistance can cause. Thomas not being there created the 'unless' demand ... we don't know the tone of the word and so we can't know exactly what was intended. Some people use the word 'unless' in a particular way.

It can be a word of:

- Arrogance ... this leads to firmness without flexibility ... folks absent themselves from the Christian community ... they lash out and hurt others. I am certain that this is not Thomas
- Petulance ... this leads people to conclude that unless they have been part of things from the outset, they will take no part whatsoever. In a local community, it can lead to a minister having to walk on eggshells. I don't think that's Thomas
- Selfishness ... this can lead us to focus on ourselves in an unhealthy way. It's a way of saying 'If I'm not there ... I will not believe.' This is the attitude that could be described in terms of 'hold up the show until I'm in my seat'. I don't think Thomas was like this
- Apathy ... can hinder all things. The student joked after seeing a notice on the college noticeboard which read 'The Apathy Society would not be meeting this week—it can't be bothered.' Apathy is not an appropriate description of Thomas.

Absence is more often from choice, rather than by accident. It could be that, for Thomas, it is a matter of fear and pain. He may well be turned in on his own sense of grief.

However, it is possible to put things right and the account of Thomas says loud and clear that nobody need miss out on knowing the Risen Lord. Thomas' absence is corrected a week later when his being there was the beginning of his change in the Risen Power of Christ.

The presence of Christ activates recognition

We are told it was a week later that the disciples were once again behind 'locked doors'. The disciples were prisoners in the room upstairs where they sought shelter from what was going on outside of them ... as well as seeking peace from what was going on inside of them.

They locked themselves in for protection, but it would seem that nothing could still their trembling and fearful hearts. There may well be something to link the fact that it occurred 'a week later' (v.26). This gathering may be the first commemoration of the resurrection. The disciples were together—and this time Thomas was with them.

Jesus knew what had been going on in Thomas' life and the story is a beautiful insight into the loving, gentle and understanding nature of Christ. We don't have any certainty that Thomas touched the Risen Jesus Christ ... in fact I like to think that he didn't need to do that. The presence of Christ made all the difference.

We can read into the words that Jesus gave some kind of mild rebuke, but we must be careful not to handle the passage too strongly. There are a number of things that are worthy of our attention:

- Jesus Christ knows about our doubt and the circumstances ... he met disciples behind locked doors. Thomas' stated conditions for faith are explicitly met in the words of Jesus
- Thomas articulates a great Christian affirmation, 'My Lord and my God!' (v.28) The words are very much words of worship. Jesus receives worship from him without resistance
- The presence of Jesus Christ allows Thomas to come through his doubts to a clear and firm conviction.

One writer explained a good practical understanding of this encounter might be, 'Put your hand in my side, if you still think you need such a test.' Wonderfully, Thomas bounces from the very lowest point to the very highest point. In John's gospel, Thomas appears not so much as an out and out doubter; he was loyal, and this is revealed in John 11:16 and 14:5. A M Hunter helps us when he writes, 'He was literal minded and demanded certainty as a condition of his self-committal. Wanting to believe, he was held back by fear and disillusionment.'

The presence of Jesus comes to the uncertain and enables a real response, which evokes recognition. With openness of spirit, we are welcomed by God and we can see him.

The recognition of Jesus Christ by Thomas is made possible by being in the right place at the right time. The transformation of Thomas typifies the constant transformation that goes on in the hearts and lives of those who are open to his grace. This requires on our part:

- an eagerness to meet him—which in turn replaces fear and doubt
- a readiness to follow him—which replaces the desire for evidential proof
- a desire for sacrificial service—this grows out of our experience of the Risen Lord.

Jesus understands Thomas' situation and responds to it. The release from his fears and all that holds him back makes worship and service possible. Does Thomas help us to come to terms with our own challenges, to know that God meets us in the mist of our fear and doubt ... and all that holds us back from life in the Risen Christ?

A faith which is inspired by revelation

F F Bruce reflects upon this incident and the words of Jesus: 'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.' (20:29) and suggests this is Jesus' 'last beatitude'. It has a special message for readers of the gospel ... the first readers had not seen, and neither have we; yet they and we can believe.

The confession of Thomas 'My Lord and my God!' ... may even pre-date early credal confessions and is understood against the background where such a place was given to Caesar.

Whilst we must not assume that Thomas' confession was as full a confession as such words would come to mean, I tend to think they are instrumental in helping to formulate a

meaningful response to God as we meet him in the Person of Jesus Christ. Tom Wright reflected that Thomas' words were 'the greatest declaration of the Christian faith in the whole gospel ... designed to remain in the reader's mind.'

Tradition tells us that Thomas died in India ... a martyr for his faith, killed by arrows as he was praying. We know a church existed near Madras (now Chennai) early in the Christian story.

We must be reluctant to jump to conclusions about personality on meagre information, but I have a hunch that Thomas' disposition was very likely part of the problem ... struggling to make positive affirmations ... his cut-off experience may indicate he was a person who tried to work out problems on his own.

Thomas came through any doubts he may have had to a firm conviction ... and became a trail-blazer for faith. The good news is that Jesus Christ comes to us behind all our locked doors!

It is important to me that what became a sign of the Risen Lord was his scars ... his appearance may be somewhat different, but the scars are still there! Are you experiencing conflict, hurt and damage? There's a place in the Risen Lord for you!

'Seeing is believing' is how people put it ... Right! Wrong! We can only see a fraction of what is real. We can't see bacteria, nor distant weather patterns (even on the ABC maps), but we don't generally question their existence—and frequently see the impact of both. We cannot see the Risen Christ ... like those early disciples, but 'Believing is seeing.'