

Sunday 11th April 10.30am Acts 4:32-35 & John 20:19-end

Leader: Andrea Ward

Preacher: Jenny Warrington

Did any of you watch the Boat race last weekend? This traditional annual rowing race between Oxford and Cambridge was held for the first time on the river Ouse rather than on the Thames to avoid crowds from gathering. Oxford were the favourites and to start with both crews gave it their all and they were neck and neck for a while. But of course, only one team can win, and Cambridge drew ahead and crossed the finish line first. It may not be your thing but it was quite exciting as the teams almost clashed oars as they battled it out with utter determination.

The thing that really struck me, was the difference in the two crews' faces **after** they have crossed the finish line.

Oxford look exhausted as they hunched over their oars, like men who have been rowing flat out for several days. Whereas Cambridge, the winning crew, seemed full of energy, gazing upwards, as if they haven't just rowed the gruelling four-mile race at all. And this was the same with the ladies' race – the losing team, downcast, almost unable to take up their oars to get to shore, whereas the winning team were full of energy and rowed on with ease.

It's amazing, the difference it makes, to a group of people, when they realize that they are on the winning team.

The resurrection of Jesus transformed the disciples. Most Christians know that, but it is worth considering just how much they changed.

It is good to have a reading from the book of Acts this morning, alongside our John reading as we hear of transformed lives working together .. as it said, they 'were one in heart and mind'; working together, following that powerful day of Pentecost, which was another moment of enormous transformation of the disciples.

But here in our gospel reading, John is reminding us that Pentecost was preceded by Easter Sunday. That may seem obvious, but we need to remember both.

In verses 19–20, John tells us that it was the resurrection which made the disciples believe. Until Jesus appeared in their room on Easter Sunday evening, their eyes looked down in disappointment and their eyes looked at the outside world in fear. When the resurrected Jesus appeared, their eyes began to look up, and it radically altered the trajectory of their lives.

Theologian Phil Moore puts it like this 'Putting more fuel in a rocket will not make it fly any higher if it is pointed towards the ground. In other words, the power of Pentecost first needs the facts of Easter Sunday to shift the direction of our gaze.' We need to remember both.

It was like the disciples had been in a 3 year boat race; they'd been with Jesus for 3 years and seen and experienced his miracles, and in the name of Jesus, had been able to perform miracles themselves, they were on a roll. They were giving it their all – believing that they were going to win. But then, when Jesus died, they all lost heart, locked in a room in fear of the authorities. It was like they felt like they were now on the losing side.

Until Jesus appeared in the room on Easter Sunday, the disciples looked just like a losing boat race crew. Slumped, exhausted, defeated...

They fixed their eyes on the failure of their one-time friend Judas Iscariot. They were bewildered at the seeming failure of their beloved-yet-crucified Messiah. In Luke 24:17 it says that Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus stood with their faces downcast, when the unrecognised Jesus first approached them. These were defeated men and women.

And then, when Jesus appeared, they were overjoyed and their eyes flashed with energy like a winning boat race crew.

When the ten disciples (that's the 12 minus Judas and Thomas) saw Jesus standing in front of them and looked at his nail-pierced hands and his spear-struck side, they believed.

They grasped, like Paul in Romans 1: 4, that the resurrection had proved once and for all that he was the Son of God and that nothing could stand in the way of his victory. **Nothing** could stand in the way of his victory.

They believed because they saw.

In the description of this encounter found in Luke 24: 36–49, there is much more detail and tells us that they watched Jesus eating broiled fish and then listened while “he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.” It wasn’t just the power of Pentecost which turned depressed disciples into Christ’s conquerors. It was knowing, really knowing that he was alive. Jesus was recognisably the man they knew but also distinctively different with his transformed resurrection body.

Jesus is alive. As Andrea said in her talk in our Easter Praise party – well worth a look if you haven’t seen it! - we wouldn’t try talking to a relative who had died over 200 years ago, or if we did people would be worried about us – but we can talk to Jesus today because he **is** alive.

So, the disciples in the locked room believed.

In verses 21–23, John tells us that the resurrected Jesus quickly went on to give the disciples a mandate.

Having greeted them twice with that powerful word shalom, which means so much more than just peace or lack or lack of conflict – it means be at peace, know safety, contentment, healing & salvation. He confirmed that they were indeed part of Jesus’ winning team, and it paved the way for the greatest handover verse in the whole of John’s gospel:

“As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”

And what does John say they are being sent to do? To forgive others. This is mind blowing stuff. Who alone, according to the Bible, can forgive sin? Only God and so we are given the mandate, we are being sent out to bring God’s forgiveness to others. To truly be Christ’s representative here on earth.

Jesus breathes on them His spirit, to give them the Power from God to do this. It was Jesus’s resurrection that meant that sin was conquered. With this power and this mandate the disciples became powerful witnesses of the resurrection. This is emphasised over and over again in Acts – and we see it in our reading from Acts 3 – The apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

Easter Sunday positioned the Church properly on its launch pad, so that the Day of Pentecost could catapult it to the world.

Without this grasp of the resurrection, we will not look at Jesus and win. Without understanding what the resurrection has accomplished any experiences of the Holy Spirit will turn us inward for a self-indulgent

pamper party and draw the same rebuke as Jesus gave Mary Magdalene in John 20: 17: "Do not hold on to me... Go instead to my brothers and tell them." Knowing we're on the winning team changes everything.

As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:17, 'if Christ has not been raised our faith is futile and we are still in our sin.'

You may be thinking, that's all very well for those disciples who had seen Jesus's resurrected body. Most of us haven't had the privilege of examining it in order to know for sure that we are on the winning team. If that is your objection, then John has seen it coming and he responds by telling you about his friend Thomas.

Thomas wasn't there on Easter Sunday. Although history remembers him as "doubting Thomas", I think he needs renaming.... What alternative name would you give Thomas?

Why wasn't he there that first Sunday? Maybe he was the only one courageous enough to step outside?

We've seen him before in John chapter 11. Jesus had almost been stoned by the Jewish authorities, had escaped across the Jordan and when Jesus agreed to go back to Bethany to see Lazarus, he would once again put himself in danger and it was Thomas who said to the rest of the disciples – Chapter 11 v 16 'let us also go, that we may die with him'. Thomas was a loyal and courageous follower of Jesus.

So maybe we could rename Thomas – Brave Thomas?

We see him again in John chapter 14 when he is the only one who questioned Jesus by asking 'Lord we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way? A question that prompted the response from Jesus ' I am the way, the truth and the life.' He didn't just accept things, but by asking questions, he enabled himself and others to understand things better.

So maybe we could rename Thomas – Questioning Thomas – I like that one -

And here, a week after the first Easter day, he was the only remaining disciple who had not seen Jesus's resurrected body. All the other disciples going round telling him, you've got to believe because we have seen him. How would that have made you feel?

How do you feel when people tell you of miracles they have seen or prophecies they have had or amazing revelation of God during a service?

I think I can sometimes be a little dismissive, maybe a bit jealous or even perhaps a bit cross; a bit angry that I'd missed out.

The word 'put' – in verse 25 is better translated by the King James Translation – as thrust – Thomas wanted to thrust his hand into Jesus's side. I suspect he may have been a bit cross!

I wonder if it is the anger we can carry, anger about of what has happened to us, that holds us back from believing, rather than the lack of evidence? You see when Jesus did appear to Thomas a week later, there is no mention that Thomas actually did thrust his hands in Jesus side. Jesus met Thomas where he was emotionally. He understood Thomas.

So maybe we could call Thomas 'annoyed or even Angry Thomas'

What would you call Thomas? Would you relate to any or all of these possible characteristics of Thomas?

Is he just doubting Thomas?

Do you just need to see Jesus in the flesh in order to believe? Do you catch yourself thinking, If only Jesus would appear to me, then I will believe? That, my friends may be a form of that dis-ease ' if-only-it-is'.

Or maybe, just maybe it is the flipside to belief...Grappling with unbelief can actually be a powerful way to finding the truth.

John concludes chapter 20 by saying – blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe. John is not suggesting we have blind faith, but we actually do have all the evidence we need to believe, written in the pages of the bible... verse 31 ‘they are written down, that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God and that by believing you may have life in his name.’

So, it's ok to doubt but just keep seeking, keep asking. And be like Questioning Thomas.

If Thomas hadn't asked to see the nail marks and put his hand in Jesus' we would not have been given the first recorded account of a disciple calling Jesus God. 'My Lord and my God'. He finally understood the I AM sayings and knew that Jesus is Yahweh.

How helpful this is for us as we continue to grapple with who Jesus is and the mystery of the Trinity. So please, like Thomas, keep asking those difficult questions. They are the way to discovering the expansive richness of our God.

Are you like angry Thomas? Anger is a common human emotion which can create a barrier to our faith. Take your anger to God, he understands and ask him to send His peace. Spend time with God, seek help for a trusted brother or sister. Jesus knows your needs. Just as he answered Thomas in his frustration, he will answer your cries to him. Jesus came to bring peace and then commissions us to go and forgive others.

Are you like brave Thomas? – who would follow Jesus wherever he went even if it meant the possibility of death. Knowing now that our physical death is not the end, and we will be raised with Christ.

Whichever Thomas you settle with or maybe we're all a mixture of them all, know this:
You are on the winning team.

Let Jesus lift your downcast eyes
Let him lift your eyes and know he is risen. He is alive.
and let him make you ready to receive God's mighty power.

Let him remind you that you are on the winning team and go, for he is sending YOU!

Thank you, Jesus, my Lord and my God.

Amen.