

MESSAGES FROM THE RISEN CHRIST

→ Have you noticed how in recent years we don't just celebrate a "birth" day or an "anniversary" day any more, but instead we seem to have developed a season of celebration around such events. No longer is it enough for us to have just one party, or special meal or family gathering, but we find reasons to have several events all in one week or perhaps even spread out across a period of months or maybe even a whole year as we celebrate something significant in our lives!

..... Well, in many senses we would do well to remember that principle when it comes to Easter! Because Easter is not just a one day event that comes around each year, but it is a whole season in which we will now live for a number of weeks until we arrive at Pentecost. And the resurrection of Christ which is at the heart of what we celebrate has the potential to change our lives not just for a day, or even just for a season but for all time!

.....So, how has what you celebrated last weekend changed your life since then? How has your journey through Holy Week and the Easter weekend impacted upon your journey through this last week? Well, let's look again at what happened to the disciples during that week after Easter and see what we can learn from their experience and from all that the risen Christ had to say to them during that time. How might we spend this Easter season and the days beyond that as we take to heart the things that Jesus said to his disciples.

→ Let's go back to a room in a house in Jerusalem 2000 years ago. The first Easter day is coming to a close and some of Jesus' closest followers have huddled together trying to make sense of all that has happened that day. And yes, quite possibly they are a bit frightened of what might happen next, after all, they have locked the doors the gospel writer tells us!

.....The news about the empty tomb has reached the religious authorities and so they have hatched a lie and bribed the guards to say that the disciples have stolen the body. So the implications of that are somewhat frightening for the disciples. But alongside that there is the exciting news from Mary Magdalene and the other women who say that they have seen Jesus alive. Even Peter has seen him. And so as they are huddled in that room you can imagine that there is much conversation about the events of the day and a great deal of concern about what it all means for the future.

.....Then whilst they are busy recounting their stories to one another, Jesus comes and stands among them. What is he going to make of their behaviour and their conversation? Will he be disappointed that they are finding it so hard to believe that he's alive? Will he be sorry that they've found it necessary to hide away? Or will he understand the way they feel?

→ Well, Jesus simply says to them, "Peace be with you." That was a common enough greeting and probably something that he had said to them many times before. But in this situation, it was perhaps more than just a greeting, but actually a message to them. These words from Jesus would have helped to calm their fears, something which they seemed to need very much at that time.

.....I'm guessing that most of us here will have felt fearful at some time in our lives. Fearful about what's going to happen next in our lives. Fearful about what lies around the corner. Maybe that's exactly how you feel now as you look ahead to a different chapter in the life of this church and circuit or as you look ahead to particular events or uncertainties in your own family or workplace or personal situation. Well, when the disciples were locked away and full of fear, the Prince of Peace himself comes among them, shows them his hands and his side, proves that he really is the risen Christ and suddenly their fear is gone. Their sorrow turns to joy John says.

.....Isn't it amazing what difference the presence of Jesus can make, or perhaps, given that Jesus said he would never leave us, I ought to say, what a difference being aware of the presence of Jesus makes. How aware are you of the presence of Jesus with you in your workplace or when you're taking the children to school or when you're wandering around the supermarket or sat in the doctor's waiting room? Perhaps if we learned to grow in our awareness of the presence of Jesus, we might discover more peace in our lives. The more we connect with him during the day, the more we turn to him for guidance and strength, then the more conscious we become of his constant presence with us.

.....And don't these words say something to us about the heart that Jesus has for his followers? Think for a minute about the way those disciples had been behaving. Jesus had cared for them, taught them, rescued them from storms. They had told him how much they loved him even to the point of being willing to die with him, but when the pressure was on they hadn't even managed to pray with him. One had betrayed him. One had denied him. All of them had run away and left him to face the music alone. I'm not sure that my first words to friends like that would be "Peace be with you!" But that's just what Jesus said. He showed the level of understanding and love that he had for them and he has the same for you and me today. Whatever we may feel our past failures have been, however we may feel that we have let God down he still speaks into the fears and the anxieties of our hearts – "Peace be with you.

→ Then in verse 21 we find his second message, "As the Father sent me, so I send you." Jesus brings comfort to his followers through the first message but then comes the challenge and the commission – one which comes to us as individuals but also as a church. Jesus was sent to earth with a particular mission to accomplish and that work continues through us, his church. So, here Jesus is trying to help his followers then and now to see that we all share in this responsibility. Did you know that there are only four chapters in John's gospel in which Jesus doesn't refer to having been sent by the Father and now that he has completed his mission, he sends his followers into the world as his representatives, not just his followers then, but also you and me today.

.....How can we possibly do that though? Well quite simply because of what Jesus says and does next. He breathes the Holy Spirit on them and they are transformed. It is the life of God in them that makes it possible for them to do any of the things that Jesus is now asking them and commissioning them to do. So Jesus gives his followers the power and the strength that they need for the task. But look at what he says next! "If you forgive people's sins, they are forgiven; if you do not

forgive them, they are not forgiven.” Jesus not only gives his followers the power of the Holy Spirit, but here he also gives us authority.

.....He entrusts us, his church with this fantastic message of love and forgiveness. We are called and commissioned to pass on the good news of God’s love and the fact that he is always ready to forgive those who will come to him and acknowledge their weakness and their need of his forgiveness. As people respond to that good news, we as the church can offer the assurance that they are loved and they are forgiven and they are welcome. Jesus fulfilled the mission that God gave him to do, but we, his church, now have the responsibility to carry on that work in his world. Where is that calling sending us as this church today and what part is God calling you individually to play in the mission of this church?

→Then, the final message that Jesus gave to the disciples in another conversation a week later, was directed at Thomas, but I guess could equally have applied to any of the others in the room and indeed to all of us at some time or another in our lives. Jesus said, “Stop doubting and believe!” For some reason or other, Thomas hadn’t been with the disciples when Jesus had appeared to them on the evening of the first Easter. I don’t know why he wasn’t there, but he had heard from the others that Jesus was alive. They would have been excited to share that news with him, but Thomas’ response was a rather cynical one – he wasn’t at all convinced by their testimonies it seemed and he wanted some kind of proof for himself.

.....Why was he behaving like that? Well, we’ve seen something of Thomas’ personality in the gospels before. He’s not the kind of person just to go along with things. When Jesus talked to his friends about his leaving them and none of the disciples were really understanding what he was saying, it was Thomas who was bold enough and forthright enough to say, “We don’t know what you’re on about. We don’t know where you’re going. How can we know the way! He’s not the kind of person to just go along with something for a quiet life. He wants to know for sure.

.....But apart from that Thomas is having to deal with his own pain at having lost Jesus. He has been hurt and confused and perhaps we see that in his obsessions with Jesus’ scars. Like the other disciples Thomas had invested time and energy into following Jesus and it had only led to heartache and disappointment. So, perhaps he wasn’t just being obstinate and cynical here but rather he was trying to protect himself from being hurt all over again. He didn’t want to believe something and not actually know for sure. He didn’t want to risk being hurt again, so he’s just being honest with his friends when he says that he will only believe when he sees those scars on Jesus himself.

.....And so, a week after Easter, the disciples are together again and this time Thomas is there and Jesus arrives amongst them just like before with that same greeting “Peace be with you.” But having said that, he turns immediately to focus his attention on Thomas – the one in the room that needs him most of all. And as we have come to expect he treats Thomas with grace and dignity and offers him the opportunity to do just what Thomas needed to do in order to believe. He invites Thomas to touch his scars.

..... But then comes that final message to Thomas, to the other disciples and to us – “Stop doubting and believe.” The evidence is more than enough to support your faith – now you need to make a choice. And I guess there are times when we all need to hear that message, that challenge, because there is a little bit of Thomas in us all from time to time. The Lord understands our struggles and he is incredibly patient and gracious with us, but there comes a time when we must decide to embrace the truth that is before us and believe. There comes a time when it is no longer acceptable to allow pain from what has happened in the past to dominate or dictate the future. Perhaps some of us today need to let go of past experiences or let go of past pain and decide to take Jesus at his word. He has promised that he will never leave us or forsake us. He has promised to give us new life, so “stop doubting and believe!”

.....Despite all his doubts and his behaviour that may have embarrassed some of his friends, this actually became Thomas’ finest hour. Eventually he is in that place where he is able to say to Jesus, “My Lord and my God!” The one full of doubt has become the one full of awe and of worship. He recognises Jesus. He acknowledges him as his Lord and his God. And that is surely John’s intention as he includes this story in his gospel. He longs for us all to arrive at that point where we embrace the truth, where we stop doubting and believe in all that God is and all that God has promised!

→ So, as we continue through this Easter season hear the messages of the risen Christ to Thomas and the other disciples all those years ago but also to you today. He speaks peace into the turmoil, chaos and fear that we sometimes experience. Let that peace enfold you and then in turn speak peace to one another because that will continue to bind you together as God’s people here. He sends you to carry on the work that he started. Receive the power of his Holy Spirit and let that empower you for whatever part God may want you to play in his ongoing mission and finally he calls you to stop doubting and believe. Whatever may have happened in our lives over the years and whatever the future may hold, our God is unchanging and he walks with us through it all. With him all things are possible, so trust in him and continue to live throughout this Easter season and in all the days to come with him as your Lord and your God.