**The Spirit Brings the Story to Life in Us!**

**2nd Sunday of Easter**

***Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”***

John 20: 29

Sam and I have just come back from a few days break at the caravan in Blakeney, and I don’t know about you, but it feels as though Easter Day was already several weeks ago. At the caravan, we survived storm Katie; sat in the sunshine; tended the garden and walked on the beach. So being wrapped up tightly against the biting cold of last week’s *Sonrise Service* on Bell Wharf seems to have belonged to a different season!

Now, even though Easter is a festival of 50 days, it feels like it’s back to the old routine – Sam returns to work on Monday and I will be thinking about April Annual Church Meetings!

If statistics are right, about a third of people who worshipped in churches across the country last week, will return this week. That’s not a judgement on my part, but more a fact of life. How do we sustain the glory of the season, as the memory of that *first morning’s* events grows dim?

As I read to prepare for the following week’s service, many writers seem to agree that John thought this was an issue too! Being the last of the gospel writers to put pen to paper, writing as he did at the end of the first century, he wrote for people who had never seen or heard Jesus in the flesh.

Most of them had been born after Jesus had died, so the stories they heard were past down the family and community second or third hand. There may have been a few eyewitnesses around at the time of his writing, but they would have been getting on in years. A person, who was 6 at the time of the resurrection, would have been 70 when John wrote his gospel.

So John had the similar challenge that we do today. How to encourage faith in Jesus, when Jesus is no longer around to be looked at or touched?

What a gift therefore the story of Thomas was.

It must have had such resonance for John’s early audience as it does for us today. Thomas’ questioning and doubt, provides an opportunity to think how we come to believe, if Jesus is no longer around to be seen or touched.

We heard read this morning, that Thomas was not there the first time Jesus appeared to his disciples. He was the only one of the 11 who wasn’t, which gives us some insight into his personality; maybe all this togetherness was too suffocating for him.

We also know that like Peter, he distinguished himself by saying things that no one else would say. So for example, when Jesus was determined to go to Lazarus’ house in Bethany, deep within enemy territory and everyone else was trying to persuade him not to go, it was Thomas who said, “*Let’s all go then, that we may die with him!”* (John 11:16)

And when Jesus sat down to share a last meal with his disciples, telling them not to be afraid because he went ahead of them to prepare a place for them, it was Thomas who very practically said, *“Lord, we don’t know where you are* *going. How can we know the way?”* (John 14:5)

He was blunt, brave and a bit of a literal minded maverick, who could be counted on to do the right thing, but only after he had been convinced that it was the right thing.

Those who were there that first Easter evening saw the risen Jesus and they were so convinced that it was him that they told Thomas that he could take **their** word for it. Jesus was back, wounded but very much alive. And joyfully, he had forgiven them! They had run away; they had been so frightened; and they had lost courage and faith. But Jesus was back and as their *Risen Lord* he had responded to their experience of shame with the healing words, *“Peace be with you.”* (John 20: 19)

What wonderful healing words. Jesus had given them back their dignity and self-respect and more than that, he had given them a renewed sense of purpose, calling them to be partners in the revival of the world!

What joy and restoration. It flowed out of them as they said with one voice to Thomas, **“We have seen the Lord!”**

And how the story would have reached a crescendo if Thomas had replied, *“What all 10 of you, all at the same time saw him?! That’s good enough for me! I believe. Ok, so what do we* *do now?”*

But rather he said, “Unless **I** see**, ….I** will not believe**.”** And in that he becomes the stand in for all of us who would prefer to see something for ourselves before we decide whether or not it’s true.

What I think is such a relief within the story is that Jesus got this! In his compassion and understanding for Thomas, he didn’t dismiss him from the group; on the contrary, he came back when Thomas was part of the group again, just for his benefit. On that occasion no one had to take anybody else’s word for it, they all saw; they all believed; they were all blessed.

**So the question is, where does that leave us?**

They were privileged, witnessing something extraordinary in their lifetime. So how do we, who haven’t had opportunity to experience what they did, make sense of their testimony?

One of my favourite writers, Barbara Brown Taylor, says thank goodness they didn’t reduce Jesus down to 5 easy to remember slogans. Instead they collected **all the stories** they could remember about him, the lively, the joyful, the painful, the offensive and the puzzling ones that could be read in so many different ways. And people would keep coming back to these stories, over and over again, finding that they discovered something new each time they read them.

If you love stories, then you will know how this can be true. A good story doesn’t give you just a list of events; it brings the event and the people to life for you, so that you can experience them for your self.

Away at the caravan this week, I’ve been reading Boris Johnson’s, *The Churchill Factor,* and what a ripping yarn it’s proved to be. Regardless of what I might think of Boris’s politics, he tells the Churchill story with such pace, colour and down to earth style, that I’ve felt I’ve been a journalist reporting from the front line in the Boer War; an anxious member of the cabinet, before the D Day Landings; and a key witness to the threat and menace of the early years of The Cold War.

Only a precious few saw Jesus in the flesh, but millions have come to experience and believe in him through the power of the stories written and recounted about him. Rooted in history, they are more than history; Jesus is still alive in them with power to make us rejoice, delight, fear, weep, hope and act.

*“Put your fingers here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side.”*

Can we do that? No. But can the story make us feel as though we can?

If we believe and open ourselves up to the power of the Holy Spirit, we can. The Spirit can bring the story to life for each one of us.

Or perhaps more accurately, the Spirit brings **us** to life, breathing on us in the same way that Jesus breathed on his disciples, **that the story might live in us!**

That we might resound with praise on Palm Sunday;

wash one another’s feet on the Thursday;

be lost in grief and confusion on Good Friday;

laugh for joy on Easter morning;

know forgiveness Easter evening;

and conviction with Thomas the week after.

That we too might be heard to proclaim – *My Lord and my God!”* (John 20: 28)

Amen