

## SERMON FOR 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter 23.4.17

### ALL SAINTS CHURCH, BIRKENHEAD

#### REV JORDAN GREATBATCH

“You have to see it to believe it!” we are told. Science gives weight to this fact – only empirical observable evidence is to be believed.

However sometimes we might see a film or a theatre piece and as much as we try to describe the wonderment, or the emotions, or the grandeur, we seem to be lost for words and give up. We give up and utter “You have to see it to believe it.” Whatever this thing is, it just cannot be described by words, it has to be *experienced*. And that is at the heart of today’s Gospel.

Poor old Thomas has got a bad rap over the years. He is portrayed as the ‘doubter’ the weakened disciple who can’t take the disciples on their word, he has to *experience* it. He has to experience it like all the other disciples. Mary Magdalene as you will remember saw the empty tomb, but

she did not believe until the risen Christ appeared and spoke to her directly, personally.

Then, when she told the disciples about her encounter “I have seen the Lord”, they dismissed her words, because they had not seen for themselves, and locked themselves in a room to hide. When, on Easter evening, Jesus, did appear in the dark corner to which they had retreated, he showed them his hands and his side, and it was only then that all the disciples rejoiced.

So Thomas was not the only one to have doubts when merely hearing about the resurrection appearances. Like the other characters in the story he wanted to see for himself “unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in the side, I will not believe.

We are not told if Thomas took Jesus up on his offer of tangible demonstration of his existence. What we do know is that Thomas’s response to that offer – “My Lord and my God” - is one of the strongest declarations of faith recorded in the New Testament. Perhaps it was enough for Thomas to know that Jesus cared enough to give him what he needed, that Jesus did not despise his doubt.

Perhaps that was enough for Thomas to see the risen Christ for who he is and address him with reverence and fear.

In Thomas, we see the pattern of Christian discipleship established from the beginning of John 1. One person encounters Jesus. Then they share their experience with the next person, who may express some reluctance. Then that person experiences Jesus on their own, directly, and becomes convinced about him and then shares the news about Jesus with the next person. Andrew tells Peter. Philip tells Nathanael. The Samaritan woman tells the townspeople. “Come and See” is the refrain.

With respect to the witness of the resurrected Jesus, Mary Magdalene starts it off. She encounters Jesus, shares the news; the others don't really buy it until they have their own experiences so that they can own the experience. They become convinced and then share it with Thomas. Like the other disciples, Thomas doesn't come to the fullest faith until he has his own experience. I say fullest faith, because he already has faith. The text says, “Don't become a faithless person” (my translation). Move from where you are to the next level.

So how blessed are we, we who have not seen the risen Christ ourselves yet believe. We can often be harsh on non-believers expecting them believe as do on the on the evidence given. Many people find the idea of faith in the resurrection as a rather extraordinary leap in the modern world. Perhaps sometimes we need to listen to their concerns, invest our time in knowing how they tick, and meeting them where they are.

Jesus did not set up obstacles by expecting his followers to perform acts of trust that seemed beyond them. He was, and is, in the business of meeting people where they are. He is like a good doctor, in that he does not give the same prescription to everyone. Instead, he approaches his followers in different ways because, after all, our experiences are different and our approaches to life are different.

The call upon the disciples and the call upon us on meeting the risen Christ is the same. We are not to dwell too long in the upper room, but to step out into the world. It's not an easy world for a band of people who believe in something as audacious as the resurrection, but it is a world that seeks, that longs, that hurts.

I believe strongly that God loves all people, calls all people, black, white, poor, rich, gay, straight, good, bad, those who doubt and deny, and those who are 100% certain. The invitation is the same, come, see, touch, know that I am the resurrected Lord, for I stand among you, whoever you may be. This is our Easter faith. Let us proclaim it boldly.