



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Second Sunday of Easter

readings: [Acts 5.27-32](#), [Revelation 1.4-8](#), [John 20.19-end](#)

24 April 2022

In the popular imagery of our culture Easter is very much tied up with daffodils, eggs and newly hatched chicks, baby lambs skipping in the fields. It is very easy for us to dovetail our celebration of the new life of Easter into part of the Spring cycle. The natural environment at this time of year provides us with a wealth of helpful material for analogies with the Easter message. And while we can use the seasonal analogies to our advantage, and we do, it is as well that we see the dangers also. It is perhaps a little dangerous, if we come to see Easter, the resurrection, as part of the same natural cycle by which spring follows winter. A kind of inevitability about it. A danger that we reduce the remarkable Easter message into something routine and predictable.

For the first disciples, the Resurrection was anything but predictable. If you look at any of the Easter Day stories in the Gospels - the women going to the tomb, Mary Madgalen in the garden, Peter racing to the tomb to see for himself, the disciples on the road to Emmaus - the picture is one of confusion. Jesus's followers, quite simply, were not expecting the resurrection. There is a danger that we can forget that, because we have the advantage of knowing how the story turns out. The first witnesses to the resurrection did not have that advantage.

It is impossible for us now to hear the news of the resurrection as if we were hearing it for the first time. And yet, maybe we need to try to put ourselves in so far as we can, in the shoes of those very first hearers. We are inclined to think in our own age that somehow belief is more difficult for us nowadays. Think how it must have been for those hearing reports at that time that Jesus had risen. They knew as well as we do that corpses don't get up and walk. And they didn't have the benefit of hindsight.

For us, the benefit of hindsight - of knowing how the story turns out, is something of a mixed blessing. Reassuring on the one hand - but also - maybe - dulling the impact, and also our capacity to hear and be affected by the message. For us, the fact that Easter follows Good Friday as surely as day follows night and Spring follows Winter, can blind us to the impact and effect of it. The fact is that the Resurrection was not part of the natural cycle of things. There was no inevitability about it. The disciples were in despair. They had seen their hopes and aspirations dashed and there was no light at the end of the tunnel. And it's not the empty tomb by itself, frankly, which convinces them—why would it? It's the risen Christ who meets them in the upstairs room, bursting in on that scene of dereliction. And for others, for us, it's the changed lives brought about by that experience which is persuasive. Changed lives such as described in our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles.

And this is the context for the encounter with Thomas in today's Gospel. Apart from Thomas, the disciples had experienced the presence of the risen Lord in the upstairs room. Why Thomas wasn't there as well, who knows? But Thomas refuses to believe until he has also actually seen. A very natural human reaction. One of the dilemmas about the story of Thomas's doubting until he had seen the risen Lord for himself, is whether the author intends us to sympathise with Thomas or be critical of him. Jesus's words to Thomas:

'Have you believed because you have seen me?
Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.'

It's not an easy dilemma to resolve. Do we take those words as a rebuke to Thomas or of assurance to those who come after?

It's perhaps easier to see it as a rebuke. Jesus wagging his finger at Thomas, saying countless others will believe in me without seeing and so should you have done. Thomas being admonished for demanding proof which others, later on, not in his privileged position, will be in no position to demand - and because they believe without the privilege of that proof, it is they rather than Thomas who will be blessed.

That's one way of looking at it. It's the way of looking at it when we say Easter follows Good Friday as routinely as spring follows winter. Thomas was expected to believe that someone he actually knew, who he had seen die, had come back to life again. Not easy at all. So, it is easy to criticise Thomas for lack of faith.

I prefer to see Jesus's encounter with Thomas as encouraging his faith to come out. In which case Jesus is acknowledging that Thomas is indeed particularly blessed because he has been an eye witness to the event. At the same time, though, those who will believe without seeing are also equally as blessed as he is.

Although the first generation eye witnesses to the resurrection are in a unique situation and are hallowed by the church - ultimately, those who believe down the ages are no less regarded in God's kingdom than they are. Faith abolishes all distinctions - in St Paul's words, Greek and Jew, slave and free; but also, here, eye witnesses and later generations.

It wasn't the empty tomb by itself which convinced them. It was the tangible experience of the risen Christ in the upstairs room—in Thomas's case, so tangible that Jesus invites him to touch his wounds.

So - is there any distinction to be made between those who saw and believed, and the rest of us? Well yes. I think there is. It does actually matter that the first witnesses did actually see. It is the testimony of those first eye witnesses which makes the difference for us between faith rooted in experience and mere wishful thinking. And this is where those final verses from our Gospel reading are so important.

'Jesus did many other things in the presence of his disciples which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.'

It is the experience of the first witnesses to the resurrection, who saw and believed, which underpins the basis for our experience of the risen Lord in whom we believe today. Our experience of the risen Lord, is founded on the experience of the first witnesses.

Let's beware, then, of reducing Easter to the level of the mundane and predictable. Because that way, we not only blunt the message of the resurrection of Jesus on the first Easter Day, but we blunt our own ability as a consequence to see the signs of resurrection in our own lives now. If we lose the capacity to be surprised by the resurrection, we lose the capacity to see what is in front of our own eyes - and be moved by it.

The wonder of the resurrection now, remains in its power to take us by surprise. Its power to catch us unawares when signs of new life turn up in situations where least expected. Sometimes, the new life might be so quiet and unobtrusive that we are barely aware of its effect or its presence. Perhaps, like the first witnesses, things only click into place with hindsight.

We believe because they saw. It is because they were witness to it that it is possible for us to believe now. And, in a different sort of way, that enables us to see, too. Not physically to see the risen Lord as they did. But to see his presence in the world around us.

Where do we look for it. Where can we see it? Well, of course, for each of us, the experience will be different. It may be in a difficult situation where there seemed to be hopeless, and then an opportunity emerges, and a way through opens up where none had seemed possible. Or a personal relationship, which seemed to be drying up, and then a renewed relationship with that person develops, stronger, more stable, more satisfying; Or the realisation that there are things more important than money or possessions; Or the penny dropping that life can be more fulfilling and rewarding, when family life is not neglected through work and career ambitions; Or through the death of a close loved one, or a serious illness, the experience of which, in a curious and paradoxical way brings us into a closer awareness of God. All these are resurrection. And we will each have our own story to tell.

The key to discerning the power of the resurrection now, is our capacity to retain that same sense of wonderment at our Lord's resurrection, which characterised the reactions of the first witnesses. Why should people believe us in our own time? The message of new life, of love, of hope, is credible only if people can actually experience it. Jesus did not send us out just to tell people the good news. He sends us to live the gospel. And sometimes that means being open and honest about the struggles which go with faith, rather than the chocolate box of plain sailing certainty. That too gives it flesh and blood. Shows us as genuine. And when we do that, our faith, like that of the first witnesses, becomes magnetic and infectious. So that in their experience of us and the way we live our faith, others can not only hear the words, but see and touch as well. So that in their experience of us and the way we live our faith, others can, not only hear the words, but, like Thomas, see and touch as well.

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