

## 19. Easter: Seeing and Believing

Blessed are those who have not seen, yet have come to believe.

*John 20:29*

The section about the resurrection in St John's Gospel is very different from the earlier chapters. Before the story of the crucifixion there are some seventeen chapters. They often consist almost entirely of long abstract passages which John has created out of the teachings and impact of Jesus. Some are accompanied by arguments between Jesus and the people. Then, suddenly, after the resurrection, we move into a much simpler world. There is no lengthy teaching, no long discourses, no arguments; it is all very vivid and homely, like the story in chapter 21 of Jesus cooking a fish breakfast for his disciples, who were worn out after a night's fishing. They had caught nothing. But the unexpected meeting with Jesus and a breakfast cooked by him was their experience of a resurrection indeed, new life after a dark night. Today's Gospel passage from John 20:19-31 falls into two main sections. The first is when Jesus appears to his disciples after the resurrection.

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' After he said this, he showed them his hands and side.

*John 20:19-20*

The setting is on the first Easter Sunday in the evening. The disciples have barricaded themselves in. They are determined that they are not going to go the way of Jesus. They want to be safe. They want to protect themselves from suffering and death. But Jesus appears, shows them his hands and wounded side. Then he tells them to do the very thing they were determined not to do. They have to unlock those doors and go

out into the world that crucified him. 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' (20:21.) He gives them the Holy Spirit and the command to continue his ministry of forgiveness. 'If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven.'

Jesus is clear: his ministry is not over. It is just beginning. He will minister through them; through his new body, the church. Wherever the church continues Christ's ministry it brings his forgiveness, as it has done in South Africa. During the Cold War, I saw the Conference of European Churches bring Eastern and Western Christians together. Christ's forgiving ministry is vivid in the sacramental ministry of confession. Every priest at ordination is commissioned to convey God's forgiveness. I remember a psychiatrist saying that every patient he treated was sick through lack of forgiveness – unable to forgive life, their parents, or themselves.

The second important section comes shortly after the first:

Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord!'

But he said to them, 'Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.'

Thomas was not there for the resurrection. Thomas is clear. Until he sees the nail marks in the hands of Jesus and puts his finger into the wounds in his hands and side, he cannot believe. By the time St John's Gospel was written in 90 CE or so, many of the original eyewitnesses had died. A new generation was being baptised which had never seen Jesus. Some were like one of my children who, after prayers, looked up and said, 'If only I could see Jesus.' But John knew that seeing did not inevitably lead to believing. Many had seen Jesus in his lifetime and did not come to belief, so Jesus says, 'Blessed are those who have not seen, yet have come to believe.'

Many of the original readers of St John's Gospel were in the same boat as us. How do we come to believe when we have not seen? Many come to believe in the same way as those two disciples did on their way to Emmaus. Their hearts burned within them while Jesus expounded the Scriptures; and he was revealed to them in the breaking of bread (Luke 24). We recognise how this was a pattern for the Eucharist which we still follow this morning: Jesus known through the word and the sacrament.

Anthony Bloom was for many years the Russian Archbishop in London. After the Russian Revolution his family fled to Paris. He trained as a doctor; he was a determined atheist. But one day a friend persuaded him to hear a talk by a priest. He was repelled by what he heard and rushed home to check the talk against one of the Gospels. He chose the shortest, St Mark, because he didn't want to waste time on a longer text. While he was reading St Mark's Gospel, he became aware of a presence and realised it was Jesus – a presence he said later that had never left him. In the 1920s, 1900 years after that scene in the upper room, Jesus could still appear and call a young Russian doctor in Paris to follow him and continue his ministry. 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

We forget how extraordinary it is that suddenly, out of the blue, there appeared these twenty-seven documents that were later formed into what we call the New Testament. All these documents grew out of the faith of this new community after and through the resurrection. No person in ancient history is so well-documented by so many different pieces of writing as Jesus. Central to all of them is the resurrection. People since Christ have come to know him through the Scriptures and the Eucharist, the breaking of bread. 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

Many people come to believe through contact with the believing community. The church has had a glorious record as well as a terrible one. We hear so much about the evils of religion that we forget its riches – treasures, as Paul put it, but treasures in earthen vessels (2 Corinthians 4:7).

When in 1968 Tony Bridge became Dean of Guildford people were fascinated to discover that for many years previously, he had been an atheist and painter. First of all, he had explored theology. He wrote in *They Became Christians*: 'I was appalled by the depth and profundity of Christian thinking, and by the cogency of the Gospel and the claims of Christ; for the very last thing I wanted to do was to become a Christian.' He was initially reluctant to join a Christian group, but that played a crucial part in his conversion: 'It was something in the group of people themselves: something about their quality of being, which left me feeling like a thirsty man in the desert who has suddenly been given a glimpse of a well-watered oasis. There was a lovingness, a peacefulness, a sense of shared and accepted purpose, a humbleness before facts which made me feel singularly small and lost.' Would an atheist visiting your home here in Portsmouth find a group of that character through this cathedral?

St John makes clear that in writing his Gospel he is not imparting neutral information like a timetable of the daily trains from Portsmouth Harbour to London Kings Cross. Instead, he says: 'These are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.' (John 20:31.)

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