

- Who are your sympathies with? Thomas is a very attractive character because he exhibits such human characteristics so openly. After all, don't you find doubt is a very natural response to faith? If there is anyone here who does not doubt their faith at times, I challenge you to put your hand up now!!
- I wonder though, whether doubt is sometimes also a tad self-protective and self-indulgent? If I were Thomas, and my 10 friends had said they had just seen Jesus and he were alive, I think my first response might have been to wonder what was wrong with me? Why had Jesus appeared to them and not to me? Was I not good enough? Or successful enough? Or holy enough? I would feel left out!! So to deny it allows me to retain my self-respect even if it does not lift me from my depressive state of mind. I can protect myself by not believing and indulge myself with waves of self-pity! That's enough about Jesus! What about Andrew?
- And doubt is petrifying. It immobilizes us. This is evidenced in the Gospel reading. There were the 10 disciples excited, bouncing around jubilantly. *'We have seen the Lord.'*
- And there was Thomas. Obstinate, obdurately standing still as he says, *'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 his side, I will not believe.'*
- Which are you? And what made the difference? And how do we know for certain?
- For the disciples in that locked room on the evening of that first Easter Day there are three things that happened that energized them. First of all they met Jesus. *'Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'* Second, they responded to him. Their doubt was quashed. *'Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.'* Third, he gave them the Holy Spirit, John's version of Pentecost. *'he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'* Remember this is the Holy Spirit of Jesus. By receiving the Spirit they received Jesus themselves. Three in one and one in three. His new life filled their lives. No wonder they were exuberant! Remember your confirmation? That's what happened then!
- And none of that was true yet for Thomas. He was still petrified. Stuck at the cross! The empty tomb meant grave robbers rather than new life. Desecration rather than hope.
 - He got it all a week later! *'Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!'*
- Remember these were the same disciples plus a good few dozen more who we hear about in Acts, our first reading. *'With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.'* There's not much room for doubt there!
- So meeting Jesus made the difference and the disciples knew for certain it was true because they began living it.
- They began doing what Jesus had told them to do. He said, *'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'* He sent. ... They went. *'With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.'* It is clear that by the time we get to Acts, the difference in the lives of the disciples was enormous.
- "But wait a minute," I hear you think. "That was all very well for the disciples. That was 2 000 years ago. They'd met Jesus. They were much holier than me anyway. It's all I can do to haul myself out of bed on to Zoom for 10.15am, let alone give *'testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus!'*"
- But you have met Jesus! You've met him in the singing of hymns, the prayers of the people and the reading of scripture. You meet him every time you worship with other Christians. The fact that you're here today and you keep coming back means that what we are doing is more than an academic exercise. It's more than a habit or a holy club. You're here, because like the disciples, through the Holy Spirit Jesus is here as well. When you were baptized Jesus invaded your life and shared it with you, through the power of that same Spirit. When you receive a morsel of bread and a sip of wine, you are sharing the broken and resurrected body of Jesus. His wounds are all too evident to see.
 - The disciples met Jesus, they responded and they received his Spirit and the difference was easy to see.
 - We meet Jesus, we respond and we receive his Spirit and can you see the difference? ...

- When you and I do something that is sacrificial, or which celebrates Jesus, whether that is giving financially to the Church at a level that you notice, or supporting the Foodbank or looking after your elderly neighbour, or being a school Governor, or walking instead of driving, one of the major reasons you're doing it is because you are used to meeting Jesus and responding. You have received his Spirit and he has invaded your life.
- It may not be easy. You only have to read a little bit more of Acts either side of this reading, to discover that the disciples ran into all sorts of problems and had all sorts of squabbles between themselves, but the more you do, the less you doubt and the more sense it makes. Legend has it that Thomas discovered this and in fact trotted off to India to preach the Gospel there. He tackled his doubt and lost his inability to live.
- What about you? What can you point to that allows you to live as a child of God and how do the things that you do affect the doubts that you feel? And what has this got to do with peace?
- Because when Jesus met his disciples he said on both occasions, *'Peace be with you.'*
- *'Peace be with you.'* Won't it be wonderful the first time we are able to share the Peace in church again? How long will it go on for do you think? This passage from John is the place where *'Peace be with you'* enters the liturgical language. But listen again. Because after Jesus gives them his peace he also challenges them with something rather more unpalatable. *'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'* ... *'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'*
- I quite like the idea of pronouncing forgiveness in the name of Jesus Christ and even have the temerity to think that I might do it rather well each Sunday morning in church. It enables people to leave their burdens at the foot of the cross and indeed, to find peace. Or at least the challenge to go and tackle whoever it is they've upset and find peace and a renewed relationship that way. Which may be fairly uncomfortable whilst you're doing it, but brings the potential for peace later on.
- No, it's the sting in the tail at the end that gets me. *'if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'* I want people to feel better not worse. I want them to feel peace not guilt. I don't want to be known as a judgemental, holier-than-thou curmudgeon! Someone who doesn't offer forgiveness easily. That won't let me gain peace in my own life, will it? Proclaiming judgement on others?
- But remember, forgiveness isn't cheap! It cost Jesus his life. And in order to be forgiven you've got to admit your guilt. And the disciples seemingly only conquered their doubt and found peace when they were doing the things that Jesus called them to do.
- If they'd simply received the Spirit, gone back to homes and waited patiently for 'life to go back to some sense of normality', then I suspect peace may well not have been theirs, doubts would have begun to rise and they waited for Jesus to act rather than realizing that he was calling them to act so he could act through them.
- The world is looking for peace in the most unlikely places. Two weeks of peace by the pool in Marbella is what many people are yearning for after 13 months of pandemic but that is a million miles away from sharing the Peace in church. And both equally unattainable at the moment. What do you understand by searching for peace? Absence of noise? Freedom from stress? A chance to do nothing? And end to fighting? I'm not sure that the disciples achieved any of these in the years following Jesus saying *'Peace be with you'*, and giving them his Spirit. And yet you feel that the Acts reading, chaotic and busily noisy as it is, contains real peace within it.
- Peace is found through doing what Jesus calls us to do. Doubt is conquered by doing what Jesus calls us to do.
- To challenge this doomed search for peace by huge swathes of the population of Britain, involves judging, challenging people to question, pointing people in a direction to own their own mistaken hopes. They need to do all this before they can see the need for change. *'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'* Is this what this means?
- Does this mean that it's up to us to announce to the world the true way to find peace and that by doing this we go a long way towards removing our own doubts? And only by doing that do we go further down the rocky road of finding peace ourselves?
- So what should you and I be saying? And how should we be saying it? Are can you see ways in which you are doing it? Are you like Thomas before he met the risen Jesus, or after? And is that how you want to be?