

Heavenly Father, help us through the power of your Spirit to rejoice in the faith of the risen Christ.

- Wearing a little bit of white plastic in your collar leaves you open to being targeted as a fall guy.
 - “Let’s ask him a really hard question about God to which there is no real thought out answer and watch him squirm!”
- Some of these questions are relatively simple to answer. “Who made the dinosaurs?” I have no trouble with. “Was Jonah really swallowed by a whale?” is another easy one. I can even cope with “Was Mary really a virgin when she gave birth?”, as long as I don’t have to explain it to a 10 year old.
- However the statement that has reduced me to a gibbering wreck for much of my ministry is “I can’t believe in a God who has let my parent or sister or pet die.”
 - It’s quite easy to answer dispassionately. But this question is never dispassionate. It’s always fully turbo-charged with emotion. It’s quite easy to say that God has got them safe in his arms and there’s nothing to worry about. But that does virtually nothing to help the pain of the distressed person whose loved one is no longer by their side.
- And I suspect this was the situation Thomas was in on that first Easter Week.
- Think of the poor chap. John’s gospel paints him as naturally depressive anyway. Just a few chapters earlier in chapter 11, he is heard mournfully saying about Jesus going to Jerusalem, *‘Let us also go, that we may die with him.’*
- So this downbeat character for whom the glass is always half-empty, will be further knocked back by the death of his friend and mentor, Jesus. Jesus has been his reason for living for the last three years. He appears to have given up everything to follow him. Jesus was worth following. And now Jesus is dead. The degrading death of a criminal on a cross. His hopes were dashed. Ever the realist rather than idealist, he could see no hope. The Eeyore of the disciples.
- So when his friends breathlessly tell him they *‘have seen the Lord’*, they just rub salt into the wound. Now he feels excluded as well. He grumpily says, in character, *‘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.’* Why should he? There is little sense of peace about him!
- This is an intensely realistic story and it certainly doesn’t pretend everything will work out all right. It paints the personalities of the apostles and calls them to look at life as it is and to make good decisions as best they can. Listen to Jesus commissioning the apostles once he has breathed the Holy Spirit into them. *‘If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’*
- Jesus is clearly not saying that personal responsibility for our actions is removed and sin doesn’t matter anymore. He is not saying that because of the resurrection all our problems are going to float away. He is commissioning his beloved apostles to roll up their sleeves and be God’s Kingdom interacting with the world he is seeking to transform. Transform by love. Transform by justice. Transform by peace. There is still a world of difference between the Kingdom of God and the earth we live in. The conclusion of the story has not yet happened.
- And Thomas is about the first example of the rest of the apostles putting into action Jesus words, *‘If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’*
- The disciples approach him with Good News. *‘We have seen the Lord’*, and he refuses to even countenance the idea. He is left in his sin. His depressed loneliness. His grief.
- There’s one interesting point that I’ve noticed for only the first time this year which shows the greater courage and direction which the resurrection brought the ten apostles who saw the risen Jesus on that first Easter Day. Before the first time they met him, *‘the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews’*. The disciples were frightened. There was little sense of peace or security about them. We know this because *‘the doors ... were locked for fear of the Jews’*. However one week later *‘the doors were shut’*. The doors

were not said to be locked only shut. Does that show a new confidence? A greater sense of peace and security? At any rate it corresponds with the view that true peace can only be found through Jesus Christ.

- Thomas discovers this, when he sees Jesus and exclaims in a shocked whisper, *'My Lord and my God!'* His separated state from the disciples is dissolved. His eyes are fixed on Jesus and his retained sin is forgiven. He, too, is an apostle! Commissioned. And sent.
- Well, of course it's alright for Thomas. The person he loves is dead no longer. He has been raised to life. Thomas has seen him, touched, him, talked to him. How does that help the person who says, "I can't believe in a God who has let my parent or sister or pet die"? How can they get the peace that Thomas received?
- I do believe this story has the answer but we have to look at the bigger picture.
- We have here a God who certainly does engage with suffering, pain, loss and death. Whatever else you say about the Christian story, you cannot possibly pretend that God does not understand, or has not shared the same emotions with you. Victimisation, a mockery of a trial, a criminal's humiliating public death. God understands alright!
- We also have a God who offers a path through suffering and death. For after all 40 days after Easter Sunday Jesus disappeared again as he ascended into heaven. The apostles were still bereaved in that sense. But they had a direction to follow. A way of living and a distinct meaning to life. For they had been commissioned to engage with the fallen world, *'²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'* And of this because they believed in a God who is alive!
- Further we have a God, who brings meaning to loss and suffering. I don't know about you, but the response of the disciples that first Easter Day when they met Jesus, seems joyful but wordless. *'the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord'*. We've no idea what they said, if anything. However when Thomas is brought face to face with the risen but still wounded Jesus there seems to be an even greater sense of awe and relieved joy as he says, *'My Lord and my God!'* The loss and the extra week's suffering and Thomas's personality seem to bring a greater sense of relief and freedom. The peace spreads!
- And in both cases, the peace only begins after accepting the resurrection of Jesus. *'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'*
- So each person has a choice. If they are in a Thomas situation and stuck in a situation of loss, refusing to engage with the living God, "I can't believe in a God who lets this happen", they are keeping a separation from Jesus. And separation from Jesus is known as sin. Their sins *'are retained'*. There is little sense of peace about someone in this situation, let alone the peace of Christ.
- And each of us has a choice. For we have met the risen Jesus and had the Holy Spirit given to us through prayer and sacrament. Our role is to explain that if they are seeking peace; if they are seeking answers, then a sure fire way is to turn to Jesus and admit the possibility that he may exist after all.
- For after all, very few of us will not have experienced some sort of grief and loss, some sort of engagement with suffering and death. Perhaps not through crucifixion as Jesus did, but simply through being human. And accepting the risen Christ doesn't always take the pain and loss away, but I guess we can all point to the sense of peace and meaning and direction that it brings.
- So personally, I have decided that the next time someone says to me "I can't believe in a God who has let my parent or sister or pet die.", I am going to answer them by witnessing, like the apostles, and saying "Just try it. It's what keeps me going!" Amen.