

## **Sermon for Holy Communion on the Second Sunday of Easter, 23rd April 2017**

*Acts 2:14, 22-32; John 20:19-31 - Doubting Thomas*

What a week! There we were last Sunday, having a joyful time after our Festal Eucharist, enjoying a Pimm's in St Mary's Hall, to celebrate the happiest day in the Christian calendar, Easter Sunday: Jesus is risen! We were looking forward to pushing back a little, rationing ourselves to three Easter eggs - I mean, three square meals - a day only, (with a heavy emphasis on roast lamb, of course), and enjoying the spring sunshine. Metaphorically speaking, however, there were darker clouds on the horizon, as we found out when the Prime Minister, having returned from a weekend walking in Wales, announced that there would be a general election.

I have a friend who has a code by which he shows secretly that he doesn't like somebody very much. This is, that he says that he wouldn't like to spend a walking holiday with them.

Oh, well. I see that it was on a walking holiday that Mrs May reached her important conclusion that, after all, having thought that originally it wasn't going to be necessary, a general election was what she wanted. It is indeed remarkable what walking holidays can lead to. I'm sure that being in Wales had nothing to do with it.

But despite all that, in church we are still very much involved in the Easter story, and I think today we have one of the great lessons, one of the great Bible stories, which has made a big difference to the lives of loads of people, and still does, even though we live such a long time after the time of Christ and in a place and a time where the miracles of Jesus seem very far away. Indeed it feels that, these days, the real surprises are not miracles, which we kind-of rule out, so much as things like unexpected general elections.

In our prosaic literal world I think quite a lot of us can get rather uneasy in church or around professing Christians because we are worried that some of them can sound much more certain and much more definite about things than we feel able to be. What did happen, really? Can anybody be raised from the dead? Was it all just a 'conjuring trick with bones'? The former Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins, was reported, incorrectly, as saying that the Resurrection of Jesus Christ was a 'conjuring trick with bones'. What he actually said was that the Resurrection was 'much more than a conjuring trick with bones.'

Contrast what St Peter is saying in our first lesson from the Acts of the Apostles: 'This Jesus God raised up and of that all of us are witnesses', he

said. He was able to say that he and the other disciples actually witnessed Jesus resurrected: Jesus brought back to life, at first hand.

You contrast that with Thomas, doubting Thomas, Didymus, Thomas the twin, not accepting the other disciples' testimony. He hadn't been around when Jesus appeared to the rest of the disciples, and he said this rather ghastly thing about wanting physically to touch Jesus' wounds, to make sure he was not some kind of an apparition or ghost. And then, of course, Jesus appeared. Actually, even a ghostly presence would have been pretty remarkable, but it is quite clear that this did not happen. The doors were locked.

And then everything changed, even for Thomas: 'My Lord and my God', he said. Nothing was more important for him after that.

Then Jesus said something which is still very much a message for us today: 'Jesus said to [Thomas], 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.' 'Happy are they who never saw me and yet have found faith.'

As a Reader I sometimes take people's funerals. Some people are very well organised, and they ask me, while they're still around, to help them prepare for their funeral. I am happy to do that. One pretty common, but basic, question that people have, is whether it's all right to have your funeral in church even if you have doubts about some of the things we say in the Creed - perhaps even about Jesus' Resurrection.

I try to reassure people. Of course they can have a church funeral. There is no entry exam for being a Christian. The story of Doubting Thomas shows that Jesus had no difficulty with the fact that, for some people, it was just too big a step to believe that someone who had died, (especially someone who had died such an awful, surely final, death, of course), that anyone who had really died could possibly rise again from the dead, could come back to life. Jesus wasn't at all put out by Thomas' sceptical request. 'Come and touch me. Reach your finger here: see my hands; reach your hand here and put it into my side; be unbelieving no longer, but believe.' [John 20:27]

For some of us, it's enough that it's clear that the life and death of Jesus was written up in contemporary histories, by Josephus and Tacitus. Also that it is clear that something extraordinary happened as well as His life and death. Enough people had seen Jesus' miracles when he was alive, so when the story of his rising from the dead came out, it got legs, as we say - and it hasn't stopped running ever since. Frankly if all it had been had been just a story, albeit a very good one, it would have faded away over time.

And I think that it's at least arguable that, unless Jesus had been resurrected, no-one would have seen him as the incarnation of God, God in human form. But if we accept that God, the divine Unmoved Mover, is omnipotent, there is no reason why God should not have reanimated a dead person.

Arguing the other way round, one can reason from the fact of the Resurrection to the existence of God: from the fact that Jesus rose from the dead one can infer that someone or something outside the laws of physics must exist, to allow it to have happened.

But let's look at it another way entirely. What are you doing when you 'believe': when you have religious faith? Another translation of our Gospel lesson [NEB] uses the expression to 'find faith', to have faith, rather than to 'believe'.

You can literally believe that something happened, or you can 'have faith' about it. Having faith isn't the same as holding to a particular proposition. It has a connotation of trust, as well as, or perhaps even instead of, a literal, propositional, belief. It's a belief in, having confidence in, trusting in something, which isn't necessarily the same as a belief that a certain thing literally happened.

*[Formal logicians might want to consider:*

*Alternative 1: Resurrection happened (R) if and only if I believe that R (B)*

*Alternative 2: B then necessarily R*

*Alternative 3: B then possibly R,*

*Etc.]*

You will remember what St Paul said, in his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15, reading from verse 35. [NEB]

*'But, you may ask, how are the dead raised? In what kind of body? How foolish! The seed you sow does not come to life unless it has first died; and what you sow is not the body that shall be, but a naked grain, perhaps of wheat, or of some other kind; and God clothes it with the body of his choice, each seed with its own particular body. All flesh is not the same flesh: there is flesh of men, flesh of beasts, of birds, and of fishes—all different. There are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies; and the splendour of the heavenly bodies is one thing, the splendour of the earthly, another. The sun has a splendour of its own, the moon another splendour, and the stars another, for star differs from star in brightness. So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown in the earth as a perishable thing is raised imperishable. Sown in humiliation, it is raised in glory; sown in weakness, it is raised in power; sown as an animal body, it is raised as a spiritual body. If there is such a thing as an animal body, there is also a spiritual body.'*

What St Paul is saying, in effect - and I think that this gives us great comfort - is that we can have confidence, we can have faith, that there was a resurrection, and that there will be a resurrection: we can have faith, even though we don't know, in a mechanical sense, how it works.

The disciples, Thomas, and St Paul were all lucky, lucky that they encountered the risen Christ. They could believe, as anyone who sees something, believes that it's really there. But you don't need to have 'met the Lord', in some supernatural way in order to be a Christian. You might have seen a vision or heard voices - but we tend to say those are signs of madness, rather than of divine revelation.

So you can be a perfectly good Christian without necessarily believing every detail in the Creed. But what about Mrs May and her Welsh walking holiday? For Doubting Thomas, the Resurrection changed his life. Can any of this make any difference to Mrs May and the other politicians?

We know that Mrs May and Mr Farron go to church; we think that Mr Corbyn is rather more private in his religious observance. I suspect that he goes to the chapel rather than the parish church on the hill. But May and Corbyn both mentioned, and emphasised, the Christian Easter message in their broadcasts last Sunday.

Some of you will now be getting a bit worried that I might start to say something political from the pulpit. Surely not! That's not to say that ministers can't say what they honestly believe to be right, in any given situation. The guiding principle is, 'What would Jesus do?'

I do think that it will be a very good idea, in the weeks leading up to the election, for all of us to look at each of the parties' manifestoes, and try to measure each party's proposals against Jesus' teaching. Don't just follow your tribe: try to follow Jesus. I doubt whether we could necessarily always agree what the conclusions would be, but I think it will help us to judge whether one or other of the parties will govern in a more or less Christian way.

So the questions might be: 'Brexit', or remain? Austerity, cuts, or more money for the NHS, schools and the welfare state? Higher taxes? Lower taxes, or the 'triple lock' on old-age pensions? Overseas aid: more defence spending? Portuguese nurses and Egyptian surgeons - remember our most distinguished heart surgeon, Sir Magdi Yacoub, came from Egypt, and his successor at the Royal Brompton and Harefield Hospitals, André Simon, who saved my brother's life when his heart valve collapsed without warning, came from Germany - German surgeons, Polish plumbers and Transylvanian care

home workers - or would you rather have immigration limited, limited to tens of thousands only?

Are there any miracles around to help today? What would Jesus say? Pontius Pilate asked, 'What is truth?' Well, we have to try to find out. Our children's future, and the peace of the world, depend on it.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant