

EASTER 2 - 29 MARCH 2007 Sermon for St Andrew Thropton

The Gospel [John 20.19-31] reading this morning records the second and third appearances of the risen Jesus. The first was to Mary Magdalene in the garden, which is part of the Easter Gospel from John and we heard that on Easter Day. These three appearances take place in or very close to Jerusalem.

We often say: 'Seeing is believing'. And today we read of the blessing given to those who actually believe **without** seeing. The first appearance ends with Mary taking the message to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord" and then telling them what Jesus had told to her.

The second appearance was to the disciples in the upper room. Perhaps the disciples continued to meet in the upper room where the Last Supper had been held. But they met in something very like terror. They knew the hatred of the Jewish leaders who had stage-managed the death of Jesus, and they were afraid that their turn would come next. So they were meeting in terror, listening fearfully for every step on the stair and for every knock at the door, in case the temple guards of the Sanhedrin should come to arrest them too. As they sat there, Jesus was suddenly in their midst. He gave them the normal everyday eastern greeting: "Peace be to you." It means far more than: "May you be saved from trouble." It means: "May God give you every good thing." But simply by being there he gave them the best thing - the thing he most wanted - himself.

This encounter with Christ results in the disciples telling Thomas, who hadn't been present, "We have **seen** the Lord" - (the same words that Mary had used). The word 'seen' is a very strong word and can also be used to convey that one has **experienced** something. Max Boyce, a mad Welsh comedian, had a catch phrase about a famous match when Llanelli beat Glamorgan - 'I KNOW, 'cos I was there'. 'I was there'. It conveys so much more than - 'I saw it'.

The disciples were **there**, they experienced the risen Lord. The same word is used by Jesus to Thomas in v. 29: "Have you believed because you have seen me?" For the first time we notice that believing involves more than just seeing the risen Lord. The Greek used in the New Testament is very flexible and nuanced. Each of these verbs is in the perfect tense, which implies a past action with continuing effect in the present. They saw and experienced

something in the past and which continues to affect their lives in the present.

John writes quite late after the first Easter - perhaps 50 years or more. Yet it is possible that if there were still eye-witnesses of the resurrected Jesus in the community that John is writing to. They may have thought themselves better than the "not seeing" believers. For John there is no such distinction between believers at all. Whether they were really old people like himself who had been there, or whether they were people who had come to faith through the preaching of the believers, they were all Christians. Whatever their historical situation, we, on this Sunday morning, have not seen the resurrected Jesus as those first disciples did. But we are, I trust, people of faith.

John finishes this section of his Gospel with a statement that all these things are recorded so that 'you might believe'. The story does not end with just "seeing the Lord," but by believing and sharing the message.

I would add that some scholars think that the actual gospel of John finishes there, and another hand writes a final epilogue - and in some sense this is a good place to close: John says: "Well here it is, I have set it all out so that you might believe that Jesus is the promised one". The end.

So often when this passage is read, poor old Thomas gets a hammering. Not today. I am not going to have a go at Thomas - I want rather to think about Jesus' blessing - "How blest are those who have never seen me and yet have believed" This poses an interesting question: "If faith is not based on seeing, then what is it based on?"

I think the answer given in the text (and throughout John's gospel) is that faith is to be based on the word. Thomas *should* have believed the word from the other disciples: "We have seen the Lord" (v. 25). Similarly the other disciples *should* have believed the word from Mary: "I have seen the Lord" (v. 18). The fact that they were still behind locked doors because they were in fear for their lives shows that even if they **had** believed the word, it didn't make any difference in their lives. Their lives were transformed only when they **experienced** the risen Lord for themselves. But they did not have faith through the word.

From John 1:1 to at least 20:31, all of the writing in the gospel is about being confronted with the Word. First of all, Jesus as the incarnate Word, whose

presence is salvation for those who believe that he is making God known to the world and judgment for those who are blind to that revelation.

Many people have been brought to faith through the Word written by John. The entire Gospel of John is a Word that presents Jesus as the revealer of God and as the saviour for those who believe and as judge to those who are blind to that revelation. Salvation is determined by the way one responds to the Word; not by what one may or may not see. Salvation comes through our ears more than through our eyes.

I am glad that Thomas does get this mention in the Gospels. I don't know why he wasn't there when Jesus first came to the upper room. It does show that staying away from the gathered company of believers can lead to missing things. By staying with the church as a regular attender, we can all catch up together with what God is going to show us.

Thomas had two great virtues. He absolutely refused to say that he understood what he did not understand, or that he believed what he did not believe. There is an uncompromising honesty about him. He would never still his doubts by pretending that they did not exist. He was not the kind of man who would rattle off a creed without understanding what it was all about. Thomas had to be sure - and he was quite right.

There is more ultimate faith in questioning things for ourselves, rather than simply passing on the so called accepted wisdom. It is doubt like Thomas's which in the end arrives at certainty. Thomas's other great virtue was that when he was sure, he went the whole way. "My Lord and my God!" said he. There was no halfway house about Thomas. He was not airing his doubts just for a semantic discussion; he questioned in order to become sure; and when he did, his certainty was complete.

And when we fight our way through our doubts and our questions and reach the conviction that Jesus Christ really is Lord, we too can say with Thomas: My Lord and My God.