

Sermon – Easter 2

John 20: 19 to 31

Christ is Risen! **He is Risen Indeed!**

This Sunday, we embark on the period between Easter Day and Pentecost and we heard the second of three resurrection stories. Last week we heard about Mary Magdalene finding the empty tomb and then meeting the resurrected Jesus, and I challenged you to think about our community as a mission field for our own proclamation of faith. This week the Gospel reading is set on the same day, in the evening, as the disciples gather together and the resurrected Jesus appears to them. Next week, we will hear about the disciples' experience on the Road to Emmaus. These resurrection stories challenge us. They ask us to respond to the risen Lord.

Where are you in your faith journey? Are you like Thomas, wanting more proof? Thomas does come around in the end, quite gloriously when he becomes the first disciple to proclaim "My Lord and my God!". But perhaps this story is a great way to explore our own blindness, our inability to see and understand things as they could be. Thomas was confronted with a new vision, a vision of a resurrected Jesus, but at the start he couldn't accept that. How often are we confronted with a new vision and find ourselves unable to buy in, to move from one state to another? Perhaps Thomas's condition is more common than initially considered. Let's look at our Gospel reading today with this thought in mind.

Well, our reading today opens with the disciples, except Thomas, locked up in a room, possibly where they had their last meal with Jesus the week before. They are fearful and confused, uncertain and wondering. Like us, each of them is at a different stage of their journey to belief. We know for

example that the “beloved disciple” believed by just seeing the empty tomb and grave clothes, as described earlier in the chapter in verse 8.

And then the amazing happens. Jesus joins them and stands among them. “Shalom” he says, or “Peace be with you” as it is translated here. He gives them that deep seated sense of peace and wellbeing that comes with faith and belief in the risen Lord. His “Shalom” on Easter evening is the complement to his “It is finished” on the Cross. Jesus’ death and then resurrection is the climax of God’s story of creation and journey with the people of Israel. Jesus’ death and resurrection is what enables us to live in peace and reconciliation with God. It is indeed belief that brings peace. How often is it that times of unbelief create tension, uncertainty and disconnection?

Then Jesus shows the disciples his scarred hands and side. The risen Lord bares the marks of his suffering. As we travel through life, we too bear the scars of our misfortunes, marking us with our human experiences, but as Christians we carry the belief and hope of our own resurrection. Day by day we are renewed in our earthly endeavours and one day, we will be united with our God and Saviour. Until that day, we try to do our best to be united and reconciled with our God, with creation and with the people around us.

Then Jesus says “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” and he breathes on them and says “Receive the Holy Spirit.” This breath is the same word used in the creation story, when God formed man from the dust in the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. In Jesus, we have new creation. This act of sending the disciples into the world equipped by the Holy Spirit mirrors his own mission received from his Father and now completed. So just as the disciples in scripture were commissioned into new life and new creation to bring the good news of peace and love to the world through reconciliation with God, so too are we, the disciples of today.

Well, the disciples went from fear to rejoicing when they saw the Lord, but Thomas wasn't there. So he had to receive the news second hand. His response, perhaps unsurprising, was "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, I will not believe". Do you know people like Thomas? People who want more proof, more evidence.

Thomas can't see the new vision can he? It's so out there, someone coming alive after a very visible and grisly death. How do you think you would have responded? How do we respond to new visions when they are presented to us? There is one new vision that I can think of that is currently in play in our society. And I'm going to challenge you as to how you respond to it.

It's the Vision of an indigenous Voice in our Constitution. It's a vision that was presented in the Uluru Statement from the Heart, written six years ago in May 2017 and I want to quote some of this beautiful statement.

"Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes were the first sovereign Nations of the Australian continent and its adjacent islands, and possessed it under our own laws and customs. This our ancestors did, according to the reckoning of our culture, from the Creation, according to the common law from 'time immemorial', and according to science more than 60,000 years ago.

This sovereignty is a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or 'mother nature', and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors. This link is the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better, of sovereignty. It has never been ceded or extinguished, and coexists with the sovereignty of the Crown."

I can hear echoes of the creation story in this statement, can you? Many of you will remember that in 1967, a referendum was held in Australia to remove

Section 127 of the Australian Constitution that said “In reckoning the numbers of the people of the Commonwealth, or of a State or other part of the Commonwealth, aboriginal natives should not be counted.” Until this time, aboriginal people were not even counted as people in this country, the country of their birth and origin.

The statement of the heart says “In 1967 we were counted, in 2017 we seek to be heard.”

The Statement from the Heart presents us with a new vision for aboriginal people. I do think it is a collective point of shame that they are the most incarcerated people in the world. In our country, Aboriginal youth are more likely to end up in jail than finish Year 12.

I don't believe that this issue is a political issue. I think it is a moral and ethical issue. Where have 50 years of aboriginal programs and services led us? To a state in which the metrics for aboriginal health, education and well being continue to lag well behind those of every other segment of our population. Slowly but surely, we as a society are destroying the indigenous people of this land. Something has to change.

And theologically, this is not the vision of God, who sent his Son to die on a cross and be resurrected to bring in new creation, a world in which we are reconciled to both God and creation, and this includes people within our own society, aboriginal people. And I see plenty of blindness in response to this new vision for the aboriginal people. The ending of the Uluru statement of the Heart is “We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future”.

I have heard people say that the state of the Aboriginal people is “not something that I am responsible for”. I have heard people ask “Why should they get a voice in the constitution and not others?” Well, I think that we all

have a choice. We can continue as we are and be part of the destruction of a whole race of people, or we can say that it's time to try something different. And quite frankly, if a constitutional Voice empowers these people, if it enables us all to work together to improve their lot, then I think we privileged people should see this vision and help make it happen.

So what happens with Thomas who failed to see the new vision in the first instance? The following week the group is again in the house, this time with Thomas, and Jesus appears again. Again he says "Shalom" and then he directs his attention to Thomas and says "Put your finger here and see my hands.....Do not doubt but believe." And Thomas answers him and says "My Lord and my God."

Thomas comes around in the end and in a truly magnificent way. He is the first disciple to call Jesus 'My Lord and My God'. Perhaps like some of us, he just needed something particular to him to come to that point of belief - that point of believing that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing, we have life and peace in his name. And I love Jesus' response to Thomas! "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen but have come to believe." And that indeed is all of us who believe. We are blessed and sent out to proclaim the good news in the communities in which we live, and love and breathe.

Our Gospel reading today gives us a story of belief and unbelief, and the response that we can have to the Risen Lord. And the disciples did respond to this amazing news in different ways just as we do today. So how do we respond to these readings? How do we respond to the Risen Jesus? Will we be like Mary, the Apostle to the Apostles, and go out proclaiming the Good News? Will we be like Thomas, not sure to start with but then fully engaged? Tradition has it that Thomas took his mission east and started the early Christian communities in India. Will we be like Peter, a leader focused

on obedience to God, perhaps because of his shortcomings on the night that Jesus was betrayed. In all cases, we can be confident that the Holy Spirit will guide us, will feed us and nurture us.

What steps can you take, in your belief, and in your mission to proclaim the good news? How will you act upon the new visions that are presented to you at both a national and local level?

Shalom!