

Sermon: John 20:19-end (19th April 2020)

I wonder if you like me have been captivated by the way the sponsored walk by Capt Tom Moore – 100 laps around his garden to match the coming of his 100 years – an incredible act of mobilisation of hope and goodness and honour – as the anticipated long-shot £1000 has now surpassed 25 million!

What an incredible phenomena – something that can't be explained – lots of people have done and are doing great things to raise cash for good causes – but this has simply exploded into life and literally left us in now doubt that even in the midst of the heartbreak and economic and social chaos wreaked upon us through Covid-19 pandemic –

And something Capt Tom said on the news really moved me – he was asked to give a message – and he said that while it was hard – to keep going – it will turn out alright – the clouds will lift and the sun will break through again – and I want to add that he was almost saying to people – do not be afraid – keep going – it will work through and you will get back on your feet...

So what was it about Capt Tom's venture – why did this take off – uniting a nation and the world in a common bond of finding hope and faith in the goodness of the world – in something good.....

And when we look at the spiritual slant on this – the principle we are seeing playing out is that faith – is the opposite of fear

Capt Tom has a conviction – through experience – that it will be okay – and this is weighted in a tried and tested faith in that –

And anything authentically grounded in such a faith of goodness and trust and optimism will bear fruit – in some good way – in the end...

And this is where we can join the experiences of Capt Tom's namesake – who we have come to know as doubting Thomas – WHO – though he wasn't with his friends behind those locked doors on the FIRST DAY OF THE WEEK WHEN Jesus greeted them with 'peace be with you and breathed on them 'Receive the Holy Spirit' – was certainly present when Jesus came again a week later – doors shut but not locked this time – and greeted them with that holy greeting 'Shalom' Peace be with you....

Thomas had missed that chance to return a greeting of peace back to Jesus – so you think he would have been overjoyed to have a chance this time – but no, that's not how it was...

Thomas had been a bit of a doubter earlier on when, even after having witnessed Jesus raising his friend Lazarus to new life – and learning that Jesus would be leaving them soon in the warning of his impending death – Thomas had said 'We do not know where you are going – how can we know the way?' when Jesus was forewarning them of his impending death.

And it's just come to me that this was just like me – and my friends will tell you – that for years I doubted – despite all the signs I was getting that the God of the Gospel. Jesus was calling me to more peaceful times – I wouldn't have it – I thought I was running the show -

Do you recall Jesus' reply to that question Thomas asked? He said 'I am the way – the truth – the life.....'

So when his Spirit-filled, newly liberated friends and followers of Jesus – disciples - brought the good news of the appearance of Jesus to Thomas, it does seem as though once again, Thomas is doubting and struggling with what the others are telling him, and demands physical proof of such a thing -

And he gets his moment – Jesus is standing among them again saying 'Peace be with you.' And inviting Thomas to touch his wounds saying the words 'Do not doubt, but believe...'

But actually – if we look at the bigger story, perhaps he wasn't the only doubter – perhaps he was just being honest in his doubting.

In the beginning, on Easter morn, the women weren't believed – Peter and the beloved disciple had to go and look for themselves... and - at Jesus' first appearance, it was only *after they* were shown the wounded hands and side of Jesus that the disciples recognised Jesus and rejoiced and received the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps what Thomas had was simply an honest integrity that he didn't pretend to understand something he actually didn't understand.

What this is showing us is that this post-resurrection account helps us to see is that we don't have to be first-hand witnesses to receive the full power of the resurrection experience...

And the resurrection experience is the joy, the hope and the tangible presence of Jesus Christ within our midst, embedded in our hearts and minds through the power of his spirit within us pouring out into our life experiences through our willingness to believe and to be open and trust in 'something good'....

Although we weren't there at the empty tomb, in the upper room, or even at the other miracle events during Jesus' ministry, we CAN bear witness to the risen Lord today

And another thing we can take from this reading is that Jesus offers the disciples his peace even amidst the fear of being captured by the Jews as well as in the joy of recognising their Lord.

Even in doubt and testing times, Jesus is there saying 'Peace be with you' – the peace of Jesus is with us whether in the darkness of fear, the doubting of faith, or in the lightness of joy...

We are given permission through Thomas to be honest about the fact that sometimes, we do need to question our faith and what we believe in, in order to deepen what we already actually know...

Jesus understands and helps us to dispel such doubts and anxieties: 'Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe' he says encouragingly to Thomas.

This is a compelling message for us - living in fear and anxiety and in THE MIDDLE of a lockdown caused by an invisible and invasive killer virus pandemic

What this message can say to those who are yet to find faith – exploring faith - and those of us whose faith shakes a little each time we hear tragic story after tragic story through this and other times of troubled times is that by hearing the good news that is being proclaimed from those already following Jesus, doubters and sceptics can also experience the peace that comes through knowing Jesus – and the sense of belonging that comes from living in relationship with God.

Faith comes to light for those who become willing to believe, despite the seemingly bizarre turn of events in worldly terms.

We're not actually told that Thomas did reach out and touch Jesus's wounds – Jesus' voice, urging him to 'not doubt but believe' was enough for Thomas to respond to him by declaring one of the most powerful confessions of the Gospel as to who Jesus actually is - 'My Lord and my God'. Jesus REALLY WAS GOD and nothing less...

Tradition has it that Thomas actually went on to live out a powerful ministry as a missionary, setting up churches in India and possibly Partha – he was also the first apostle to die for the cause.... Thomas truly did live out a deep faith.

While we are not expected to die for the cause, we can all think about how we can, like Thomas, see this resurrection story and all that it means as a really big deal – God is walking among us in the face of Jesus IS a big deal and good news.

Resurrection Easter people – those who are fighting against their fears by trying to nurture their faith – are people who live in hope that a new and transformed world is possible.

The wounds of Jesus weren't hidden – his peace and love came alongside the wounds and are an acknowledgement of vulnerability and weakness brings about the beginnings of hope and healing.

A final thought - Jesus made his first appearance to the disciples in a room that was locked, but the doors were merely shut when he appears to them a week later. Perhaps John is telling us that this risen Jesus knows no boundaries – locked doors are no barriers to him – he can open locked doors....

Perhaps he is saying to us that fear locks us in – paralyses – whereas being honest about our doubting-Thomas thoughts, and questioning our sometimes fragile faith is actually the key to flinging wide the door of limitation and being set free. Thomas is our role model in not being afraid to exercise a healthy enquiry and open mindedness that will challenge and stretch our faith while at the same time deepening the conviction of its authenticity.

And Capt Thomas Moore – is our role model for today – a stoic and steadfast gentleman doing what he can – raising cash for NHS – mobilising people to share what they have – (not give) – bearing the light of goodness and hope in new things to come that has swept across the land.

EVEN in the darkness of all that we are going through, let's not forget everyone is doing their best – trying their best – and let's stretch our tolerance and courtesy, patience and trust a little further..

Everyone has a part to play in this –

But – we all must remember that we are merely the players. God is the director and has given everyone a part in this moment in time – and together – through the power of good – the power of grace - we can work towards the common solution where we will have passed through this valley of the shadow of death and get to the green pastures and still waters of safer shores once again

So in faith, however deep, however wide - let us give thanks and humbly receive through grace, the ultimate good news and very last benediction of Jesus bestowed upon us all through John's Gospel: 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

Amen