

*“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them;
if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”*
In the name our risen Lord.

Amen.

The doors to the house where they were staying were locked. They had not been outside for some time. And then he appears and breathes on them. He says to one of them, reach out your hand. Touch me.

Good morning friends. I am guessing you have heard by now the story of Thomas so many times. But perhaps this morning some of these details leapt out at you with a kind of fresh and unexpected resonance: cabin fever; exhaling in close contact and without a mask; the invitation to reach out a bare hand and make contact with someone who has just come in from God only knows where.

Living as we are in a new and stressful and temporary normal, I guess we can be forgiven if these details from John’s gospel are distracting little triggers for us this morning. **Forgiveness**, after all, is what the Easter gospel is all about. Forgiveness.

Maybe that’s not the first theme which springs to mind when you think about Easter. But the older I get, and perhaps the more I realize *need* to be forgiven myself, the more I see forgiveness as a sort of through-line in the good news of the resurrected Christ.

Just look at what happens in this familiar story from John. Jesus appears first on the evening of Easter Sunday to eleven of the twelve, sequestered in the upper room. To these eleven, wrapped in fear, he says “Peace.”

And then this: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

He is looking now, I think, to release them not only from their physical confinement but from a way of living and thinking that is constantly about tallying and judging.

He is speaking now, you might remember, to the very companions who three days before could not stay awake with him. “You will all become deserters,” he had told them then, not in accusation but rather as a statement of fact.ⁱ

He is speaking now to one in particular who denied him three times.

And to these eleven, wrapped in fear, he first says “peace.” He is not about settling scores, enforcing a human sense of justice or retribution. What he does on this first Easter, as he enters the upper room, lives into what he has already proclaimed earlier in the gospel: “God sent the Son into the World, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.”ⁱⁱ

Sometimes this can be exasperating to us, when we hunger for the punishment of those we consider evil or unjust. But judgment has no place on the punch list of the resurrected Christ.

As Rowan Williams has pointed out as he unpacks these Easter stories, “Judgment is not an activity in which Jesus engages.”

“Judgment,” write Williams, “is instead an event in which his word, his image and his history acts in the world to transform.”ⁱⁱⁱ Transform. It’s not about punishment or casting out, but about transformation.

So enter Thomas, a week later. With a sort of admirable independence that kind of wins my heart, he has refused to line up with the others. “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.”

Perhaps like many grieving and traumatized people he is not allowing himself to believe in a miraculous reversal. John tells us though that on the following Sunday, *this* Sunday, “Thomas was with them” – that is, the eleven have not cast him out.

“We don’t tell each other how to grieve” is one of the mantras of our own parish bereavement group. I see a bit of that forbearance in the twelve when John tells us that “Thomas was with them.”

And while Thomas is with them, Jesus returns. And **here** is a subtlety often missed in this story.

While Jesus *blesses* those who believe without seeing, he does not curse or judge Thomas in the process. No demerit is issued. Instead he approaches Thomas with all the tenderness and love of a parent explaining thunder or lightening to a terrified child.

Come here, take a look. This is how this has gone, and here I am to tell you about it. Here I am.

The point is not *even* that Thomas is forgiven. He’s never been **accused**. Instead, Jesus invites him into an experience. That Thomas has been dubbed “Doubting Thomas” over the centuries strikes me as more than a little unfair. According to tradition, after all, he became the Apostle to India.^{iv} He traveled further than Peter, further than Paul to spread the good news of his risen Lord. And we have his story, hear it every year on this particular morning, as a reminder, I think, that doubt is a part of mature faith.

That our questions and uncertainties belong in church too, and that these are not to be condemned but to be aired and respected.

You know, there is an old and ancient principle to orthodox Christianity: “praying shapes believing.” *Lex orandi, lex credendi*. Praying shapes believing.^v We Anglicans and Episcopalians love this because we understand our liturgy, our praying, in a particular way.

It’s the pierced but living body of Christ beckoning us, like Thomas, into a particular and personal kind of experience. An experience intended, over time, to make us new.

“A Christian isn’t something one *is*,” wrote the poet, W.H. Auden, once to an unchurched friend. “It is something one can only pray to become.”^{vi}

In this context, and in the story of Thomas, lack of faith or quavering belief are **not** out of bounds. The community of the twelve, and the response of Jesus to Thomas, though, maybe signal to us what *is* out of bounds: exclusion. The insistence that I’m **in** because I believe and you are **out** because you don’t.

I think some faith experiences *can* have a sudden and dramatic quality to them, like the way electric cardioversion paddles can shock a body back into new life. Maybe that's what happens for Thomas here when he says "my Lord and my God!"

But this has been written for us, says John, so that we may "come to believe." That we may *come to believe*. It's a process. Read, mark, learn, inwardly digest, in the words of an ancient Advent prayer.^{vii} Belief can happen in that way too – slowly, and over time, even without our conscious effort.

Belief that Jesus lives.

Belief that our sins are forgiven.

Belief that even now, in our locked rooms, in a world wrapped in fear, we are being made new.

Resurrection wasn't something that merely happened to Jesus. Whatever happened in the dark and silence of the tomb, whatever happens at the heart of the Easter mystery, is happening to us too.

We all, this morning, have a place in this story. Believe it or not.

"Arise, sad heart," wrote the poet George Herbert once. His Easter poem, "The Dawning," has been set to music by my colleague Richard Webster, and it is one of the very next things you will hear this morning.

*"Arise, sad heart; if thou dost not withstand,
Christ's resurrection thine may be;
Do not by hanging down break from the hand
Which, as it riseth, raiseth thee."*^{viii}

May the love of our risen Lord, a love beyond reason and judgment and understanding, raise you up in these Easter days to come. Amen.

ⁱ Matthew 26:30 and Mark 14:27

ⁱⁱ John 3:17

ⁱⁱⁱ Williams, Rowan, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (London: Dartman, Longman & Todd Ltd., 1982) p. 8

^{iv} The gnostic *Acts of Thomas*, transcribed by the third century C.E., are wonderful reading if you are curious about the apostle. They are available online at <http://www.gnosis.org/library/actthom.htm>. Not surprisingly, this independent thinker reportedly balked with his "assignment" to India. But he went, and by tradition was martyred and is buried there in the basilica at Chennai (formerly Madras).

^v A helpful if brief discussion of this principle and the ways in which Roman Catholics, Anglicans and Orthodox variously "inhabit" it can be found here: https://religion.wikia.org/wiki/Lex_orandi,_lex_credendi

^{vi} Auden, quoted by Gopnik, Adam, in "The Double Man: why Auden is the indispensable poet for our time" published in *The New Yorker*, (9/16/2002). The full quote is worth sharing here: "The Catholic faith [i.e., the ideal Christian faith], while it condemns no temperament as incapable of salvation, flatters none as being less in peril than any other. In the same way [a Christian] has to make his public confession of belief in a church which is not confined to his sort, to those with whom by nature he feels at home, for in it there is neither Jew nor German, East nor West, boy nor girl, smart nor dumb, boss nor worker, Bohemian nor bourgeois, no elite of any kind; indeed there are not even Christians there, for Christianity is a way, not a state, and a Christian is never something one is, only something one can pray to become."

^{vii} Cranmer's collect for Advent 2 in the 1662 Prayer book reads "BLESSED Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen." In our 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* we know these words as the collect for Proper 28, the Sunday closest to November 16. See p. 184 of *The Book of Common Prayer*. For a further "unpacking" of this beautiful collect see a discussion of the Prayer Book Society's at <https://www.pbs.org.uk/the-bcp/second-sunday-in-advent>

^{viii} Full text of Herbert's poem may be found here: <http://www.georgeherbert.org/temple/Dawning.html>. Richard's stunning setting may be sampled here: <http://advent-press.com/index.php/recordings/16-new-trinity-recording>