

SERMON FOR THE SUNDAY QUASIMODOGENITI (Cape Town - 19 April 2009)

Text: ¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." ²² And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." ²⁴ Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it." ²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." ²⁸ Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (John 20:19-29)

We are celebrating today the 1st Sunday after Easter. It is in the light of our Easter celebrations last week that I would like to ask you a rather personal question: I would like to know whether the Easter celebrations have had any effect on your life? Or was it rather a case, that when on Tuesday the holiday period had passed, you simply went back to work as before, attended to your daily business, quite content to leave Easter behind where you had it found last Sunday - here in church? Or to put the question in another way: Did the fact that Christ rose from the dead bring you inner peace last week, and as result of this peace was your marriage, your family life affected, and did it have a lasting change on the way you view this world?

If Easter didn't transform your life immediately, you are not alone. In fact, you find yourself in good company: the core groups of Jesus' disciples. We read in our sermon text that one week after Easter their lives hadn't changed. In fact they were in hiding behind locked doors. On the one hand this us a bit of a surprising. One would have expected them to be overjoyed. A week before the women had broken the news that Jesus was alive. But then again the reality of Easter had no struck home. The resurrection of Jesus had not become a *personal* experience to them.

This affected the way they lived their lives. The description of their lives at that point is one of "locked doors", "fear of the Jews", just being "amongst themselves", and far too scared to venture out into the city - an image of a church that is unsure of the reality of Christ.

But it all changed in the weeks after Easter. Our sermon text covers a two week period with two separate encounters with Jesus being reported. But interestingly -

and this is an aspect which the evangelist John highlights - in both cases the life-changing encounter with the risen Lord took place on a Sunday.

On the 1st Sunday after Easter only ten disciples, a very small group, were together. As noted the doors were locked. The disciples were too scared to go out. But Jesus was ready and eager to come to them... and the locked doors didn't keep him out. In the evening of that 1st Sunday Jesus suddenly stood amongst them. He greeted them with the words: **"Peace be with you!"** And again it is as if the evangelist wants to emphasize the greeting, because it is repeated three times in the 10 verses of our sermon text: **"Peace be with you"** (X3).

Jesus' greeting reminds me a bit of 1 Samuel, chapter 16. It was at a time when Saul was to be replaced as king. And God send the prophet Samuel to the town of Bethlehem to anoint David as the new king. But the people of Bethlehem fearing the worst for what Saul had done asked Samuel on arrival: **"Do you come in peace?"** And Samuel said: **"Yes, in peace I come"**.

When Jesus suddenly stood in the midst of his disciples, they may have feared the worst as well. They had all run away when he was captured. Peter had even denied knowing him. Their actions were totally selfish and despicable. But Jesus greets them with the words: **"Peace be with you"** - meaning: I don't come in anger to punish, but I am come as the one who has worked forgiveness. And he says to them: **"Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; (and) if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven"** (v.23).

With those words Jesus outlines the core of the Gospel message that he wants his disciples to carry out into this world. It is a message of peace - peace in a world characterised by animosity, strife, hatred and endless conflict. And the risen Lord calls on his disciples, you and me, to carry this message of peace into the world - in the way we live our lives, the way we talk, the way we give testimony of him.

From that first encounter with the *living Lord*, the door of that room in which the disciples of Jesus had locked themselves was *strictly speaking* wide open. This group of disciples became a "church" - a church, that reached out into the world. And do you know what changed their lives? It was a personal encounter with the living Lord.

The first person these disciples reached out to was Thomas. That 1st Sunday when the rest of the disciples experienced Christ, he wasn't there. But when he came back, he found a group of disciples "overjoyed", exclaiming with huge excitement: **"We have seen the Lord"**.

Understandably Thomas was taken aback. Put yourself in his shoes for a minute. A good friend of your dies. Maybe you were even at the death bed and saw it happen. And some other friends come along and say: "You know so and so who died last week, we have seen him." How would you react? Most probably you would say: "That is nice!" But in your head you would think: "These guys are delusional. People that are dead, are dead. They don't become alive."

But let us give Thomas credit, where credit is due. He doesn't reject the testimony of his fellow disciples out of hand. He doesn't say to them: "You are mad. I don't want to hear this story." Thomas is not "faithless" (without faith), but he has doubt... and he wants to be convinced. He wants to see for himself the mark of the nails and the cut of the spear.

This, dear friends, is the "reality" of faith. Where there is faith there is also doubt. Where there is belief, there are also questions. Faith and doubt always go hand in hand. It needs to, because the believer is called to trust in a Lord that he does not see. He dares to go, where there is no path. He hopes where strictly speaking there is nothing to hope for. He crosses on a rope, where there is no catching net below! The church preaches a Christ, where the world sees nothing else but a heretic and cheat worthy of punishment.

But notably Thomas' doubt is not driven by curiosity. This is important. He is not just an uncommitted spectator or bystander. His doubt is the flip side of his deep desire to experience Jesus. And Thomas is not content to build his faith purely on experiences and theories *of others*. He wants the assurance for himself. And rightly so, because "faith" is something "personal". I don't go to heaven because my parents believed, or my wife believed. Faith is something that must happen to "me" - personally. This is what prompts Thomas to ask his critical questions.

Jesus does not disappoint Thomas. But Thomas needs to wait for at least one more week, until the next "Sunday". We realise of course that Jesus is not bound to reveal himself on Sundays only. He meets people whenever he wants too. But then again he has bound himself to the means of grace, he himself chose. This is what the evangelist John highlights and that is also the experience of the Early Church: Where people gather in Christ' name, that is where Jesus tends to reveal himself.

It happened to Thomas. The disciples were all together. Again the doors were locked, which is possibly a reference to Thomas' own state of mind. But as Jesus did with the other disciples, he greets Thomas with the words: "**Peace be with you!... Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe**" (v.26-27)

The evangelist doesn't say, whether Thomas in fact touched Jesus. But Thomas believes. His faith is expressed in the words: "**My Lord, and my God**" (v.28). He doesn't say: "Oh, now I realise there is a Lord, and there is a God". Faith is personal: "**My Lord and my God**".

I realise that you may interject at this point and say: But I don't experience the risen Lord as Thomas did. I can't put my finger in his wounds and my hands in his side! You are right. Times have changed. And Jesus prepares us for this change with the words spoken to Thomas: "***Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed***" (v.29). Today we are largely dependant on the witness of the first disciples. But this lack of seeing does not block the future journey of faith. People will believe the words of Christ's witnesses, although they do not see him. One such example is given in 1 Peter 1:8. The apostle Peter writes to his congregation: "***Though you have not seen him [that is, Jesus], you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.***"

How can this happen? It happens through the Holy Spirit when a group of people like us today meditate on God's word, share the sacrament instituted by Jesus. And suddenly we know: He is alive. He is right here amongst us. We have a personal experience with the living Lord.

When that happens to you, your life changes. The world out there is different. You encounter things that should scare you, but they don't anymore. Maybe you have heard, that Maggi's dad had a severe stroke this last week just before they were due to fly back to Durban on Thursday. He is half lame. He cannot speak. We feared imminent death. But as we stood at his bed often this past week, I sensed, despite the trauma, "peace" - peace in the knowledge: Christ is alive. Not even death can separate us from his love.

This is the message, the world needs to hear. And Christ wants to use you and me, his church, to carry this message out. And here he prepares us for this journey. Amen.

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