

*When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.' But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, '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.' A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.' Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*

Today is the second Sunday of Easter: Easter is more than Easter Sunday, it is a season that continues for fifty days until Pentecost. Easter isn't over, even if the shops have sold all the chocolate eggs and hot cross buns. Every Sunday throughout the year is an Easter festival and a celebration, when we recall our Lord's death and resurrection; and during these seven weeks, the lectionary readings will help us to focus on the implications of the resurrection.

In this section of John's Gospel we hear today about Jesus appearing to the disciples on the evening of resurrection day, when they were frightened and locked indoors. Jesus blessed and commissioned them, breathing the Holy Spirit into them.

Currently many of us are behind locked doors- not necessarily because we are frightened, although we might be. We have been told to stay indoors and stay at home in order to protect each other and ourselves.

The disciples were in hiding because they were afraid of being arrested, judged, and put to death by those who had killed Jesus. They had good reason to be afraid, because the Romans were merciless in quashing any hint of insurrection. If they, or the Temple leaders, decided to finish off the whole gang of rebels they could round up the disciples and make an example of them.

Presumably it was decided that killing Jesus was enough to put a stop to his movement so the disciples were safe, at least for the time being.

We are also experiencing a time of not-knowing. We have seen what coronavirus has done and is doing in other countries where thousands have died, and we can only hope and pray that the situation in Australia never reaches that point. In the meantime our lives are controlled by 'lockdown' and isolation.

It's comforting to know that walls and locked doors don't keep Jesus out! Wherever we are, God hears our prayers and is with us.

The second half of the story is about Thomas, who was not there to see the risen Jesus. We know his response; he wanted proof, to see with his own eyes.

A week later, Thomas got his proof when Jesus appeared once again and showed him the wounds in his body.

The last part of this gospel reading explains the purpose of the whole book. The writer states that he has written so that his readers might come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing might have life in his name.

After his confession of faith, when Thomas called Jesus 'My Lord and my God', Jesus declared that everyone who comes to believe in him without seeing him will be blessed.

The gospel writer wanted to encourage his readers by telling Thomas's story. He wanted those first readers, back in the early days of the church, to be encouraged that even though they had never seen or met Jesus, they were blessed just because they believed.

Readers today and throughout every time and place are encouraged that we too are blessed by Jesus because we believe in him, even though we haven't seen him.

I wonder how Thomas felt? When he came back from wherever he'd been, and his friends were all excited because they'd seen the Lord, I wonder if he felt bitterly disappointed, or left out.

I wonder if he thought they were all a bit hysterical, because it seemed too good to believe. I wonder if, by the time the week had passed, he was beginning to think they really had imagined it.

Then Jesus appeared again, and asked Thomas to check him over for himself. I wonder how that felt to Thomas? To say he was blown away is probably an understatement. I wonder if he felt a bit embarrassed because he hadn't believed the other disciples. I wonder if he was just so amazed and happy to see Jesus again that he didn't care what anyone else thought.

Jesus didn't seem to mind that Thomas needed to be convinced, which teaches us that Jesus loves all kinds of people: doubters, sceptics, questioners and wonderers, as well as those more easily convinced.

In a way, Thomas represents all of us and all believers. Just as Peter, in denying that he knew Jesus, represents our human fears and failings, so Thomas represents our questioning and doubting.

It's good to remember that Thomas wasn't the only one to have doubts. When Mary Magdalene saw the empty tomb, she thought someone must have stolen Jesus' body; she didn't believe Jesus had risen until she met him and he said her name.

Then when she went to the disciples and said, "I have seen the Lord", they didn't believe her and hid in a locked room. It was only when Jesus appeared to them and showed his hands and his side that the disciples believed.

It doesn't seem fair to call Thomas 'Doubting Thomas' because he really wasn't any different from the others; he just wanted to see for himself.

Thomas missed seeing Jesus the first time he appeared in the upper room, but we have all missed Easter-by around 2,000 years! We were not there, we did not see and touch and experience it for ourselves. We came to believe because someone told us the story in a way that made sense and invited us to say 'yes'. We heard something that spoke to us.

There is nothing wrong with questioning or wondering or doubting and wanting more. Jesus knows, and understands, and breathes his Spirit into us to help us.

During these days of uncertainty, as we wonder what life might be like after the virus, we might ask ourselves, "Where is God in all this?" God is with us, in our homes and in our hearts, waiting alongside us and loving us to the end and beyond.

The Lord be with you.