

SERMON: Sunday – 24 April 2022 – Rev Alistair Cowper

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed

Acts 5:27-32

John 20:19-31

There's something painfully true about this; something men need to guard against even in our so called enlightened society as we try to live like the early disciples who proclaimed with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, 'We must obey God rather than human beings' (5:29) Even if to say such would be to court trouble, like those disciples in Jerusalem who were dragged before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council authorities of the day.

By the time Luke writes the book of Acts, the disciples were learning what it meant to follow the Risen Jesus. Jesus was no longer with them in person but they had his presence in having received (baptised with) the Holy Spirit. The Risen Jesus had met them on the evening of that first Easter Sunday, breathed his Spirit on them and sent them out to forgive sin or not forgive sins - it would be up to them now; yet in the Spirit they would never be alone.

We have a lot of sympathy for Thomas who wasn't there that night and wanted proof, to see for himself, that Jesus really was risen from the dead.

We can't point the finger at Thomas and imply that we would never have doubts. That wouldn't be reasonable.

And Jesus doesn't seem to be condemning Thomas either, when one week later, he appears to him and directly invites him to reach out and touch.

Stop doubting and believe! Might sound like a criticism and maybe it was but is Jesus actually blessing Thomas when he says to the disciples, blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed (29)?

I think he is. Thomas hadn't been there that first night and, ok now he sees Jesus, but more importantly, now he believes.

For all of us who come later, who didn't see the Risen Jesus on that day of resurrection or on any of the 40 days before he ascended, for all of us who have since believed, we are blessed indeed.

The question is, what will we do with what we have believed? Will we forgive sins or will we not? What will our faith in the resurrection mean in our everyday lives?

Let me share three quotations I came across this week.

Desmond Tutu wrote this, “Dear Child of God, it is often difficult for us to recognise the presence of God in our lives and in our world. In the clamour of the tragedy that fills the headlines we forget about the majesty that is present all around us. We feel vulnerable and often helpless. . . . But we are not helpless and with God’s love we are ultimately invincible. Our God does not forget those who are suffering and oppressed”.

Richard Rohr puts it like this, “We’re finally indestructible when we recognise that the thing which could destroy us is the very thing that could enlighten us....God’s one and only job description is to turn death into life”.

Brian McLaren writes that, “Resurrection has begun. We are part of something rare, something precious, something utterly revolutionary. It feels like an uprising. An uprising of hope, not hate. An uprising armed with love, not weapons. An uprising that shouts a joyful promise of life and peace, not angry threats of hostility and death. It’s an uprising of outstretched hands, not clenched fists. It’s the “someday” we have always dreamed of, emerging in the present, rising up among us and within us. It’s so different from what we expected—so much better. This is what it means to be alive, truly alive. This is what it means to be en route, walking the road to a new and better day. Let’s tell the others: the Lord is risen!” [Brian D. McLaren, *We Make the Road by Walking* (New York: Jericho Books, 2014)]

That last quote got me looking further into what Brian McLaren has written in that same book and I came across this.

Reflecting on the disciples left wondering after the Risen Jesus’ first appearing to them after rising from death, he writes a wee bit about what their fellowship together will mean.

“Fellowship is a kind of belonging that isn’t based on status, achievement, or gender, but instead is based on a deep belief that everyone matters, everyone is welcome, and everyone is loved, no conditions, no exceptions. It’s not the kind of belonging you find at the top of the ladder among those who think they are the best, but at the bottom among all the rest, with all the other failures and losers who have either climbed the ladder and fallen, or never gotten up enough gumption to climb in the first place.

Whatever else this uprising will become, from that night we’ve known it is an uprising of fellowship, a community where anyone who wants to be part of us will be welcome. Jesus showed us his scars, and we’re starting to realise we don’t have to hide ours.

So fellowship is for scarred people, and for scared people, and for people who want to believe but aren't sure what or how to believe. When we come together just as we are, we begin to rise again, to believe again, to hope again, to live again."

Brian D. McLaren, *We Make the Road by Walking: A Year-Long Quest for Spiritual Formation, Reorientation, and Activation* (New York: Jericho Books, 2014).

That's a good, positive, healthy picture of what it means to be a communion of people together seeking to follow Jesus and make sense of life.

Like those first disciples, often we can feel bewildered, unsure, full of doubts, wondering what it's all about but together we can begin to make sense as we love one another and support one another in whatever ways we can.

And who knows as we seek to do this to one another we might see the Risen Jesus among us. But even when we don't, we still live, as Easter people, with the hope of new life rising all around us; blessed indeed, are we who have not seen, yet have believed.

We're about to sing a song which we've sung before called *When Thomas heard from Jesus* which has the closing words which we'll use as a prayer in closing:

O Lord, may we — like Thomas — keep growing day by day;
Increase our faith and guide us, for Lord, you are the Way.