

**April 7, 2024 – AM – online  
Bonni – Belle Pickard**

==ORDER OF SERVICE==

Call to worship

Jesus, stand among us - **StF 30**

Prayer

**John 20:19-23**

Reflection

Breathe on me, breath of God – **StF 370**

**John 20: 24-31**

Reflection

God's spirit is in my heart – **StF 404**

Prayers of intercession

Thuma Mina (Send Me Lord)– **StF 782**

Benediction

Shalom Chaverim (Peace, friends)– **StF 414**

## **John 20:19-23**

<sup>19</sup>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.'

<sup>20</sup>After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side.

Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

<sup>21</sup>Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you.

As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'

<sup>22</sup>When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.

<sup>23</sup>If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

## **Reflection**

As we gather for worship today, it's been nearly 2000 years since Jesus' resurrection!

Some one has remarked that during the days of Holy Week and Easter

We often feel closest to Jesus –

Whether they come in March or April,

These are the days when we often consciously enter more closely into Jesus' story.

Sometimes it's Good Friday for me –

The day when I allow myself to enter into his pain –

And his pain becomes mine

And my pain becomes his.

The distance of 2000 years, though, means that we're often eager to skip over the pain.

We'd like to go straight to Easter and the resurrection!

And, indeed, last week, we celebrated Easter –

perhaps with a few more chocolate eggs than we'd like to admit...

But also perhaps with new clothes and Easter egg hunts and flower-covered crosses...

At last Sunday's service, I used the Easter text from Mark's gospel –

The one about the women going to the tomb and finding the stone rolled away

And a young man sitting there telling them that Jesus had risen –

And they ran away in fear and terror –

I realised it was the first time I'd preached on that text in all my years!

Much easier to focus on the more triumphant gospel texts...

But in doing that, we also lose the opportunity to address our own fears....

Reading today's text from John's gospel – and reading it a week after Easter,

I realise that it actually reports events that happened that same evening –

The same evening that the women had brought their unbelievable report:

That Jesus had risen and was going on ahead to Jerusalem to meet them...

And where does Jesus find his disciples?

Huddled together in a house, with the doors locked 'for fear of the Jews'....

In the earlier account of John's gospel, Mary has been to the garden,

And seen and conversed with the Risen Lord,

But now we hear the disciples are still locked away in fear –

Not even willing to go out to see for themselves....

And Jesus comes and stands amongst them.

Let that sink in for a moment.

Your dearest friend,

The one you had pinned all your hopes on,

The one who had made you feel alive and whole and energized –

But then was cruelly taken away,

Brutally killed in public... Crucified in full view of everyone...

Is now standing in front of you again.

I think you'd at least take a deep breath.

Thousands of images crowding into your head –

Memories and premonitions

Elation, despair, anger, fear, confusion – total shock...  
Rub your eyes – take a quick look around the room to see how everyone else is doing...

Everyone else is shell-shocked as well.

Eyes back to Jesus –  
Who is just standing there, calmly, peacefully,  
As if resurrection was a daily practice...

And he's saying, "Peace be with you."

Right.

Well, his own peace is maddingly apparent –  
And totally beyond understanding!

I imagine there's a deep collective silence – no one quite knowing what to say...

So Jesus quietly, patiently, shows them his scars –

His hands, his side.  
I wonder if he's still wearing the grave clothes?  
Or has he left them in the tomb?

What he's wearing doesn't matter –

It's the scars that matter...  
They show what he's been through.

I wonder what scars you have –

Are they visible?  
What do they symbolise for you?  
Do you dare show them to anyone else?

My own hands now are old enough to have many scars –

From accidents, some foolish, some happening when I was cooking  
Or cleaning – doing my daily tasks...  
They are reminders of what has happened to me...

There are also scars on other parts of my body –

From skinned knees when I was a child  
From various operations under the surgeon's knife  
From other accidents...  
They all add up to who I am now – and what I have survived.

We often admire a baby's scar-less body –

But we don't go to a baby to learn about survival –

New birth is about hope for the future

Part of the Christmas celebration –

Scars are also about hope for the future –

But they are firmly rooted in the wisdom of the past.

They give credibility to promise.

How often is the credibility of a person determined by their scars?

When Jesus showed the disciples his scars

He was showing them what he had survived...

And he's demonstrating his credibility –

You can believe me, because I've been through difficult times

And I have survived –  
Rather, God has brought me out of death into life –  
I've been resurrected.

In John's telling of the story, somehow the tense choking fear of the disciples  
Is suddenly transformed into joy!  
Wow. In a moment, the blink of an eye –  
Or the revealing of scars,  
Terror becomes joy!

I wonder what sounds there were in the room then....

Interesting that at this point, Jesus again says to the "Peace be with you" –  
Maybe they can hear it differently now?  
The word in the Greek is 'Eiren' – which speaks of reconciliation,  
Of being at peace.  
What would that have meant to them?  
It seems to be more than just telling them not to be afraid...  
Perhaps they catch a glimpse of what Jesus is offering them –  
Scars that speak not of fear and terror  
But of survival, of triumph  
Hints that their fears have been reconciled –  
All they lived for – all he died for – is not in vain.

I wonder what fears are lurking in your life today...  
I wonder what peace seeing the scars of Jesus might bring to you....  
Listen with me for a few moments to a Celtic hymn about the deep peace Jesus can bring...

[Deep Peace...?]  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eve2y-P-Zjk&t=22s>

Sometimes time seems to stand still –  
I imagine it did for the disciples at that moment...  
A thousand images had been flowing through their minds –  
And a thousand feelings rushing through their bodies...

But now 'peace' – reconciling of all that had been, all that had been ripped apart –  
Now knit back together –

Deep breath.

In John's gospel, there's hardly time for a deep breath!  
Instead, Jesus continues to speak –  
In the same line, as he's offered them 'peace'  
He also sends them on their way – not just to stay where they are – in peace --  
But to go out –  
As God sent him to be with others, away from home,  
Into risk, into conflict, into all life has to offer...  
So Jesus sends his followers...  
They can't just stay where they are or always have been!

And then he does breathe...  
A deep breath in ...  
And a deep breath out...  
A breath that the disciples remembered –  
As it surrounded each of them, encircled them with peace and love  
And entered into them through their own breathing...

We became quite aware of breathing during the pandemic –  
Suddenly we became aware that our breath can travel quite a distance!  
And we learned in that period to keep our distance –  
But we also learned how much we miss being close, close enough to feel another's breath,  
To catch their spirit...

I remember a former colleague who was young and full of enthusiasm and drive  
But had recently had a diagnosis of terminal lung condition –  
She continued to come to nearly everything that was scheduled –  
Continued to want everyone to think she was 'just fine' –  
But when I sat next to her at a meeting,  
I could hear how every breath was laboured –  
Close enough to hear and catch a glimpse of what was going on inside...

The disciples are close enough to Jesus on that Resurrection day  
To feel his breath upon them  
When Jesus breathes his Spirit upon them,  
He's not breathing the breath of a dead man  
But of a resurrected man.  
One who breathes God's Spirit upon them –  
Indeed, he says the words as well: 'Receive the Holy Spirit'  
In effect, 'In-spire-ing' them – breathing God's Spirit into them.

But no sooner has he 'breathed' God's Holy Spirit on them,  
He is sending them out –  
No time to bask in a 'holy huddle' – there is work to be done!

But before they're even out the door,  
He brings up forgiveness – how we repair broken relationships –  
Perhaps he's keenly aware that they will be full of anger and resentment  
Against those who had killed him –  
About all the fear and terror that had been inflicted on them...

How would they be able to go out and tell others the good news  
If they were still consumed by the fear and anger and resentment?

I imagine it was entirely too much to take in at the time –  
More realistically, it became the project  
that underpinned most of the rest of the New Testament  
indeed, all of Christianity!  
How can we be reconciled with those who seek to harm us?

I spoke earlier of the scars –  
And the peace that Jesus had –  
So, he, with his newly repaired body – scars and all –  
Was a shining example of what was possible:  
That bodies can heal, and relationships can heal.  
That resurrection means there are new possibilities for overcoming the evil...

But so much of that healing depends on our willingness to forgive –  
That is, our willingness to absolve the other of blame.  
To continue to work for all that is good and right and true  
But also to look beyond the evil towards the goodness that can be.  
It's not saying that the brokenness did not happen.  
It's not forgetting the wrong that was done  
Or the hurt that was caused.  
Not that we condone wrong-doing or abuse  
Or the need to make the wrong things right  
It's saying that we free the other from the burden of blame –  
So that we can move forward in making the wrong things right  
In making restitution for the damage caused  
In finding new ways to be in positive and beneficial relationships with others.

That's perhaps one of the hardest tasks any human has –  
To set aside our fear, our anger, our hurt  
And work for reconciliation.  
That's what Jesus has done through the resurrection.  
That's what he offers us –  
And that's why he shows us his scars,  
Why he breathes the Holy Spirit on us,  
Why he sends us out to be reconciled to the others  
So that they, too, can be part of the Resurrected Christ!  
[Go tell everyone]

There is still another part of the Resurrection appearance in John's Gospel,  
Here these further verses:

**John 20:24-28 (29-31)**

<sup>24</sup> But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.

<sup>25</sup> 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.'

<sup>26</sup> 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.'

<sup>27</sup> 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.'

<sup>28</sup> Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!'

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So, the good news is that the disciples HAD taken Jesus' words to heart –  
They were going out to 'tell the good news –  
Even if they'd only got as far as telling the one who hadn't been with them –  
Thomas – Thomas the Twin, as it were –

But even telling the news to one who had been there with them all along  
Brought its own challenges –  
The one who'd been with them all along didn't believe their story!

Isn't it like that with us? We try to explain our faith to those closest to us –  
The ones who should understand,  
But they don't. They don't want to take our word for it.  
They should trust us!  
But they want to see for themselves...

Fair enough. We all want to see for ourselves....  
I can imagine that with all Jesus' talk about being reconciled to others,  
They were rolling their eyes –  
How can they tell others the good news if the ones who know them best don't believe them?

Likewise, Thomas – he goes off for a bit to clear his head after all the turmoil,  
And then he comes back to find all the others have lost their heads!  
Have they gone mad from the shock?

And so, Jesus waits another week – the equivalent of today compared to last Sunday,  
And he appears again.  
And this time Thomas is with them – but the doors are still locked...  
Thomas is still with them, so he hasn't given up on them completely,  
But the doors are still locked – has Thomas' doubt infected the others as well?

But Jesus' message is still the same: "Peace be with you."  
Reconciliation is still the order of the day.  
And then he approaches Thomas directly –  
Showing his scars again –  
And inviting Thomas to touch those scars.  
To feel for himself.  
To know for himself that this was the Jesus who had gone through the suffering and the pain,  
And had the scars to show it.

And that's when Thomas 'believed' as well...  
There are verses that follow in which Jesus seems to scold Thomas  
For not believing until he saw for himself...

But more importantly, I want to consider what happened to Thomas after that –  
I learned much more of Thomas' story when I lived in S India –  
Because Thomas was one of the disciples who really took Jesus' words  
About being sent out to tell the others to heart.

The legends say that Thomas joined a merchant ship going to India

And landed in what is now Chennai.  
He used his merchant/trader professional status  
As the launch base for his mission of telling others about Jesus.  
There is still a St Thomas Mount outside Chennai,  
Fabled to be the place where he landed in India.  
There is a thriving MarThoma church in Kerala on the opposite coast of S India  
Which traces its roots back to Thomas the Twin.

Thomas was part of the 'diaspora' – the followers of Jesus who, for a variety of reasons –  
Left Israel/Palestine and spread to the ends of the earth.  
Some (many!) left because of persecution.  
Some left because of business or economic reasons.  
It probably seemed at the time that Christianity was doomed to failure  
Because of all the hardships it faced  
And all the persecution that forced people to flee...  
But in reality, the diaspora was how Christianity spread far and wide...  
If everyone had stayed in one place, it might well have died  
In spreading, it often took root through the actions of common people  
Through the traders and the merchants  
Through those seeking a better (or safer) life –  
Those who had been through much  
And found their faith in God through Christ Jesus strengthened them  
The one who had been crucified and dead and buried –  
And rose again!  
Was powerful enough to sustain them through hardship and slavery  
And persecution  
And that became a very powerful message indeed.

Some have observed that perhaps part of the church's struggle to attract these days  
Is that we've grown too comfortable.  
That certainly was John Wesley's fear – that Methodists would become wealthy enough  
To forget their reliance on God.

And so we return to Jesus showing us his scars – his wounds –  
Not to scare us  
But to reassure us.  
To remind us that we don't have to have all the answers  
We don't have to have all the luxuries of life  
To tap into God's power.  
To remind us that God's mission can be dangerous –  
That there will be scars...  
But that God's power is shown most clearly in God's scars  
In God's willingness to be and work in and with our own weakness.  
So be it with us! Amen!