**EASTER II – APRIL 19, 2020**

**JOHN 20: 19-31 / DOUBT AND FAITH**

“As the Father has sent me, so I send you”. This message of Jesus to his disciples in that upper room is as valid a commandment for us today as it was for those still frightened and confused disciples as they gathered behind locked doors (that’s how terrified they still were) after the resurrection of Jesus. They were empowered to carry forward the message of Jesus’ teaching to a world which was mostly far from peaceful or prosperous. Some things never change, it seems! And certainly at this time we can relate to where the disciples were at, as we sit behind our own metaphorically locked doors, seeking safety from an enemy we can’t even see!

“As the Father has sent me” – sent to do what, exactly? I think the answer goes back to when Jesus entered the synagogue after his temptation in the wilderness and read the words of the prophet Isaiah: To bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed.

But that is only part of today’s Gospel message. The other message has to do with DOUBT. Every bit as much as those physically locked doors of that meeting room, and as our metaphorically locked doors, doubt is also a locked door, a barrier. It hampers what we can do in our lives: doubt about our own abilities, doubt about the wisdom of a course of action, doubt about the risks of change, doubt about what we believe, even for professed Christians like us. And, in these exceptional times, doubt about when – and if – life will ever return to what we used to consider as “normal”.

Thomas was the consummate doubter, refusing to believe what the other disciples told him, even though he had been with them for years and should have known they could be trusted. But he was also the consummate realist. You know, if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is!

All the disciples are hurting right now, their hopes and dreams are in pieces, never mind that some of them have apparently seen the risen Christ, and most of them do seem to have believed what Peter and Mary Magdalene told them. Thomas, as a realist, is perhaps hurting more than most. He wants to be able to “pick up the pieces” and have things as they used to be. When the others say they have seen Jesus, he thinks they are crazy, and roundly declares he will not believe until he has seen with his own eyes and touched with his own hands. Thomas is the typical example of “once bitten, twice shy”, he wants proofs, guarantees – but don’t we all when we are unsure about something? Sometimes I think it’s really unfair that this disciple has gone down in history and popular culture and language as “Doubting Thomas”! According to tradition, he overcame his doubts to travel farther than most to spread the gospel; it is believed he went as far as what is now India, and founded there the Mar Thoma Christian church, which still thrives 2,000 years on!

When they gather a week later, Thomas is with the others and Jesus appears among them again, locked doors notwithstanding. Jesus of course knows what Thomas is thinking, and invites him to look and touch. There is no denial of what happened to Jesus, the scars and wounds are there for all to see.

Jesus breathes on them and gives them the power of the Holy Spirit – an immediate parallel with God breathing on Adam and Eve in the garden and empowering them for life. Where Jesus could move freely, the disciples were prisoners of their own fears. BUT, they were still his disciples and he sought to strengthen them for their mission.

Jesus’ coming into that locked room is not the end of the story, not the final chapter. Rather, it is the opening chapter of a whole new story – that of faithful disciples freed from the locked room of their fear and doubts to go out into the world and declare the message of the Gospel.

Faith and doubt are the “heads and tails” of the same coin: where there is no doubt there can be no true faith. We need to remember that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but despair, just as the opposite of doubt is credulity, the willingness to believe pretty much anything that seems reasonably likely.

We need to remember that it is OKAY to doubt, to question, to search for explanations. It is still faith that unites us as followers of Jesus in hope.

The apostles had to see the risen Christ in order to be able to witness to those who had not seen him. We can still see Jesus in the witness of the lives of other believers; just as Jesus came again when Thomas was with the others, he keeps looking for us and seeking us, showing himself to us in the effect he has on the lives of others.

I said that both Thomas and we are looking for guarantees. But life doesn’t always provide the proofs we demand. What is essential is that we remain open to the possibility of belief, of new life, of trust and hope and love. And to do that we need to unlock that door called doubt, push it open and be willing to step beyond it.

We need to remember those last words of Jesus to Thomas: this is how they sound in the modern Message version:

*So, you believe because you have seen with your own eyes. Even better blessings are in store for those who believe without seeing.*

Do we have the courage – yes, and the faith – to step beyond our doubts and embrace those better blessings?

Perhaps never before in the lives of most of us has there been so much doubt and worry, so much need of courage and faith, as now while we continue to struggle with this pandemic. I said that Thomas wanted to “pick up the pieces” and have things as they were before. And I am sure that many of us are hoping – praying – fingers crossed – that, after this situation is over, we will be able to do just that. But realistically, that may well not be the case, and we need to gather all our faith and all our courage – and yes, all our willingness – to step out into a world which is far different. But no matter what that new world looks like, we can be assured that Jesus is there with us, our companion and strengthener and guide every single step of the way.