**Cranmer Group Sermon, Worship & Prayers**

**April 19th - The 1st Sunday after Easter**

**‘Gentleness, Grace and a Gift’ (John 20:19-31)**

*Dear Friends,*

*Welcome to the latest in our series of ‘virtual services’, on this first Sunday after Easter.*

*I hope that - despite the restrictions on us, and indeed the continuation of those now for at least another three weeks – you’re doing as well as possible in the circumstances. In particular, if there are any of you who are struggling with being isolated, whether practically, emotionally or spiritually, do please get in contact with me (contact details below), and I’ll do my best to support you.*

*I also hope you’ve been able to find joy both in the new, resurrection life of Easter Day – perhaps you saw the decorations and ‘Happy Easter!’ posters that adorned our church entrances on Easter Day – and also the new Spring life we see all around us. I know that some of the blossom in our villages is spectacular, and whilst I was walking Ella this morning, I came face-to-face with a song thrush belting out its notes for all it was worth - God’s Creation echoes our rejoicing!*

*I wish you all a very blessed week.*

*With love and prayers,*



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Alleluia! Christ Is Risen! **He Is Risen indeed!
Alleluia!**

**The Collect for the 2nd Sunday of Easter (Common Worship)**

Risen Christ,
for whom no door is locked, no entrance barred:
open the doors of our hearts,
that we may seek the good of others
and walk the joyful road of sacrifice and peace,
to the praise of God the Father.
**Amen.**

**The Lord’s My Shepherd, by Stuart Townend
(sung by Hannah Taylor, accompanied by Amy Taylor)**

The Lord’s my shepherd, I’ll not want;
He makes me lie in pastures green.
He leads me by the still, still waters,
His goodness restores my soul.

*And I will trust in You alone,
And I will trust in You alone,
For Your endless mercy follows me,
Your goodness will lead me home.*

He guides my ways in righteousness,
And He anoints my head with oil,
And my cup, it overflows with joy,
I feast on His pure delights.

And though I walk the darkest path,
I will not fear the evil one,
For You are with me, and Your rod and staff
Are the comfort I need to know.

**Gospel Reading: John 20:19-31 (New International Version)**

**Read by Mike Senior**

**Jesus appears to his disciples**

19 On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, 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’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.’

**Jesus appears to Thomas**

24 Now Thomas (also known as 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.’

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.’

**The purpose of John’s gospel**

30 Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. 31 But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

**Sermon: ‘Gentleness, Grace and a Gift’ - Rev. Tim Chambers**

Today, the first Sunday after Easter, is sometimes known in the church calendar as Low Sunday. No-one really seems to know why, as far as I can tell, although it may be in contrast to last Sunday, Easter Day, the high point of the Christian year - the celebration of Jesus’s resurrection; his triumph over death and sin. Low Sunday seems to be one of those days when, if a church has a curate, or an assistant vicar, it’s almost always them on the preaching rota, to give ‘the boss’ a break after all the busy-ness that’s gone before! But in our case, it’s my turn again today – and it’s a pleasure to be sharing with you, since this Sunday’s reading, no matter what year it is, is always the same, from St. John’s Gospel, chapter 20: the encounter between Jesus and the disciple, Thomas.

Thomas is one of my very favourite Biblical figures. The poor chap always seems to get a terribly bad press – he’s never just “Thomas”, but inevitably “Doubting Thomas”. But to me the great thing about Thomas is that he’s someone with whom everyone can associate. The way in which he – one of Jesus’s very closest followers - is so real, expressing his frustration and scepticism in a way that’s frankly pretty gory, gives each one of us permission to be honest and blunt in our faith.

We see Thomas’s humanity; his frailty. We hear his doubts. And, in doing so, the fact that many of us, at points in our Christian journey, will also have doubts, is made OK. The theologian, Alister McGrath, in his book, ‘Doubt in Perspective’, writes this:

“Doubt is often the symptom of a faith that needs to grow – to put down deeper roots….Viewed positively, doubt provides opportunities for spiritual growth. It tests your faith, and shows you where it is vulnerable. It forces you to think about your faith, and not just take it for granted. It stimulates you to strengthen the foundations of your relationship with God.”

So the doubt that Thomas shows us, isn’t a bad thing. Far from it! It can actually have an extremely positive impact on our faith; on our walk as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

But I’ve said enough about Thomas, great as he is for helping us wrestle with our own faith (and our doubts!). What I especially want to do this morning is to look in this passage not at Thomas, but at Jesus. At how the risen Jesus engages with, and speaks to, his very closest followers, in his first encounter with them after he has risen from the dead.

If you have your Bible with you as you’re listening to this - just like you’d possibly look at a Bible on the pew or chair next to you, if we were in our churches (so maybe it’s a good idea to have one with you, when you listen to our future podcast services?) – / if you have your Bible with you, turn to John chapter 20. You’ll see that Jesus’s appearance to his disciples comes immediately after his encounter with Mary Magdalene, outside his tomb. She can’t keep the incredible news to herself, and rushes to tell the disciples that Jesus is alive. “I have seen the Lord!” she shouts to them.

So the context is one of huge, turbulent emotions. On the one hand, Mary is ecstatic – Jesus is alive! She’s seen him with her own eyes! On the other, the disciples have only three days ago seen the man whom they’ve been following as their beloved leader, crucified as a criminal. The Jewish authorities went for him; surely they would now be coming after them. They hid; fearful; locked away together behind closed doors.

Under normal circumstances, perhaps it’s difficult for us to imagine what the disciples must have been feeling at that point. This year, reality is different for all of us. We, too, all know what it’s like to be isolated; what it’s like to be cut off from those we love. We, too, are anxious; afraid, even. This year, we can all understand so much more clearly, the emotions those disciples must have felt, that evening.

Remember Jesus has just risen from the dead. The one and only person ever, in the whole history of humanity, to have done so. You’d have thought the natural thing for him to do would be to burst into the room; to declare his triumph; to celebrate victory! Or maybe to ask the disciples what they were all doing cowering behind closed doors, given what he’d just done; or why they didn’t seem to have taken in what Mary Magdalene had told them, at all?

But that’s not what Jesus does. Jesus simply “comes and stands among them”, and says, “Peace be with you.” “Peace be with you”, or, more literally, “Peace to you”, in the Hebrew word, shalom; shalom, meaning to be whole, complete, at one, well. Jesus knew, in that moment, that what the disciples needed to hear more than anything else, was “peace”.

The risen Jesus comes to each one of us today - in the isolation, anxiety and fear of our Coronavirus lockdown - in the same way. With patient gentleness: not demanding from us, what we’re unable to do; not asking why we’re not this, or not that; not insisting that we should have everything worked out. The risen Christ comes to me, and to you, and says simply, gently, to each one of us, “Peace to you”.

So, firstly, Jesus comes to his disciples then, and to us now, with GENTLENESS.

Secondly, Jesus comes with GRACE.

Thomas, in all his rawness and doubt, in his frustration that he hadn’t been there that first evening, to see the risen Jesus, is pretty crass: “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.”

But when Christ comes once more to the disciples - this time including Thomas - a week later, not only does he declare again, “Shalom”; Peace to you. He addresses Thomas directly, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” We don’t know whether Thomas actually does so, though it’s implied that he doesn’t. But the whole point of the story is that Jesus was prepared to offer Thomas what he needed to help him respond, no matter how ludicrous it might seem.

Jesus understands Thomas. He understands not only who Thomas is, but also what he needs at that moment to help him; to help him believe. Jesus extends his arms of grace to his doubting disciple.

The risen Christ still meets us, just as he did Thomas. In this moment, Jesus understands you, and Jesus understands me. At this very difficult time we’re all going through, Jesus - as with Thomas - knows just how we are. He knows how I feel, and how you feel. He asks, with infinite grace, “What is it, that you need?”

So, Jesus comes to his disciples and to Thomas - and to us – firstly with gentleness; secondly with grace; and thirdly – the ‘third G’! - with A GIFT.

If we look right to the end of our reading this morning, we see that St. John sets out the purpose of his Gospel. And it is this, “that [we] may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God”, and – the gift that he gives to us through this belief – “that by believing, you may have life in his name.”

“That, by believing, you may have life in Jesus’s name.”

What is this life like, which our belief in Christ gives us?

Well, there’s one clue earlier in our reading, and there’s a second, much earlier in John’s Gospel, in some of the words of Jesus himself.

Firstly, the life that Jesus offers us is one in which we’re filled with the Holy Spirit – living within us; the presence of God, who’s given to the disciples when Jesus appears to them the first time. As we read in verse 22, “with that, he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’.”

And, secondly, looking back to Christ’s teaching in John chapter 10, what Jesus offers us - as a result of his coming to this earth, dying on the cross, and being raised again - is “life, … and life to the full.” It’s exactly the life that comes from living with our eyes focused on the person of Jesus - on his teachings, on his actions, on his miracles – and that comes from seeking, through the power of the Holy Spirit within us, to live daily more and more in Christ’s likeness. And it’s of course also life lived in the hope and knowledge, at its end here on earth, of the beauty of eternal life, with our Heavenly Father.

But this gift also comes to us, as it came to those first disciples, with an commission; the commission to respond to the words of Jesus to his disciples, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”

Christ gives us the power and the authority that come from the Holy Spirit living within us, in order that we too may share his Good News with those around us, and that they also may come to share in his life; his “life to the full.”

In his GENTLENESS, Jesus extends to us his shalom; his peace.

In his GRACE, Jesus knows who we are, and the situation in which we find ourselves, and he ministers to our needs, in this time and this place.

And with his GIFT, the gift of life lived to the full, through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus both gives us the beautiful possibilities of a life lived in him, and the glorious fulfilment of a life lived for him – a life in which we too, like Thomas, declare to Christ that he is indeed, “[Our] Lord, and [our] God!”

In his holy name, Amen.

**Intercessions**

**Led by Annie Dickinson**

Let us pray.
First, let us recall in whose presence we are, and give our thanksgiving to God.
For the gift of life.
For our friends and family and loved ones.

And especially, at this Eastertide above all, let us thank God for the gift of love given to us in the life, death and resurrection of His only Son, His beloved Son, Jesus.
For his sacrifice in taking all of the brokenness of our world, and our own personal brokenness.
For taking all of this into himself and, through the cross, pouring out his life for us.

And, though we may never truly understand the breadth and the depth of what Jesus has done for us, let us thank the Father, source of our creation, that He has poured out His love on each one of us, in raising Jesus to new life and, in doing so, opening the way for us also to enter into this new life.
Lord, in your great love for us, hear our prayer.

We pray for our world, at a time in history when it can be clear to us, that we are not the ones in control of our lives.
We pray that God's presence hover over our world and enfold us in his love and mercy.
Lord, in your great love for mankind, hear our prayer.

We pray for the Church of Christ throughout the world, that together, we may bring light to those around us.
To the lonely, that we may bring compassion and help.
To the anxious and frightened, that we may bring confidence and hope.
To the angry, that we may bring understanding and peace.
Lord, in your great love for your church, hear our prayer.

We pray for our communities, our friends, our neighbours, and ourselves.
Lord God, guide and guard us.
Help us to use this time of lockdown to draw nearer to you.
Enliven our spirits, Lord.
Strengthen us in faith, trusting you for all things.
We pray for Tim, for Clare and for Esther, and we thank you, Father, for bringing them to join our communities during these days.
Keep them safe.
Strengthen them and uphold them in your grace.

Father of all grace, accept these, our prayers, for the sake of Your son, our Lord and Saviour. Jesus Christ.
**Amen.**

**The Lord’s Prayer**As our Saviour taught us, so we pray:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.**

**The Collect for the 2nd Sunday of Easter
(Book of Common Prayer)**

Almighty Father, who hast given thine only Son to die for our sins, and to rise again for our justification: Grant us so to put away the leaven of malice and wickedness, that we may always serve thee in pureness of living and truth; through the merits of the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord.
**Amen**

**A Closing Blessing**

God, who through the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ
has given us the victory,
give you joy and peace in the faith,
and the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be among you & remain with you always.
**Amen.**

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord
**In the name of Christ, Amen.**