

What do you make of the risen Jesus?

Wilson Poon, St. Peter's, Luton Place, Edinburgh, 19th April 2009 (Low Sunday)

Texts: Acts 4:32-35, Psalm 33, 1 John 1:1-2:2, John 20:19-31

For us Christians, Easter is the supreme festival. Churches get spring clean and decorated with the best flowers. Bells are rung. Incense is burnt. Hymns of triumph are sung. We are all caught up in a compelling vision of the resurrected Jesus, and loudly proclaim, 'Christ is risen! Alleluia! Alleluia!'

But all that was last Sunday, Easter Sunday. Today, one week later, we arrive at 'low Sunday'. No one is quite sure where this designation came from. But nowadays, we are bound to see it as drawing a contrast with the 'high' feast of Easter. Today is when the rubber hits the road, and we realise with a jolt that, all too quickly, we seem to have already lost most of last week's compelling vision. On Low Sunday, we sing triumphal hymns once more (but no more incense!), and then we put 'resurrection' back in the box labelled 'Easter' for next year. All this 'rising from the dead' stuff becomes, once more, remote for another 50 weeks of consecutive 'low Sundays'.

But that is very odd, because resurrection is supposed to be absolutely central to our faith. As Paul famously said to the Corinthians:

If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. (1 Cor. 15:14)

So how is it that 'resurrection' appears so remote to many of us except on one Sunday each year? I think it has something to do with the fact that we tend to file 'resurrection' in our minds under 'past' and 'future', but not under 'present'. 'Past' and 'future' are certainly the emphasis for our Easter celebrations: we celebrate the fact that Jesus *was* indeed raised from the dead on that first Easter morn, and we celebrate the sure hope that one day in the future, we *will* all be raised with Christ. 'Was' and 'will' – past and future; but the present is conspicuously absent. But if 'resurrection' is a present reality for Christ, and it is, then for those of us who live a new life 'in Christ', 'resurrection' should be a present reality, too. Our gospel passage today gives us a picture of what 'resurrection now' may mean.

The story is well known. It is the story of so-called 'doubting Thomas'. Now, I think Thomas gets very bad press that he does not deserve. In the Collect for feast of Saint Thomas (which is on 21st December), we ask God to help us *not* to be like Thomas! No one else gets this treatment in the entire saint's calendar. And all because he just asked to be like the others! Remember that John's resurrection account began with the Apostles Peter and John running to the empty tomb. They *saw* the folded grave clothes, and believed. Then Mary Magdalene saw the risen Jesus, and, significantly, did *not* recognise him. It is possible to see and *not* believe! But when she heard Jesus call her name, she, too, believed. Finally, all of the other apostles except Thomas saw Jesus in their house, and they all believed. The point is that they *all* had to see before they believed. Thomas asked for no more than that. The only difference is that he had to ask, while the others got their chance to see Jesus without having to ask for it. There is nothing wrong with that.

It is unfortunate that many English versions translate verse 29 of our passage as a question, and have Jesus say to Thomas, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me?’ Put like this, it is hard not to hear at least an element of rebuke. But that would be so unfair! All of the others have also ‘believed because they have seen’. However, the original Greek did not have punctuation, and the sentence can just as well be read as a statement: ‘You believed because you have seen me.’ Put like this, we don’t have to hear any rebuke. It is just a statement of fact. I don’t think Jesus was rebuking Thomas at all. Instead, he was speaking to us – those of us who may be tempted to sulk about having to believe without the chance of seeing.

And, of course, we are able to believe without seeing because that first generation saw and believed – the writer of the first epistle of John reminded us of that in our reading today, that he, and Thomas and all the other apostles ‘declare to you ... what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands ...’ (1 John 1:1)

So, Thomas’ bad press is undeserved. But there is more than that. His encounter with Jesus in fact gives us an object lesson in ‘resurrection now!’. To see that, we first have to ask what it is that those first disciples believed when they saw. At first sight, this may seem a trivial question. But it is not; indeed, I think examining this apparently trivial issue carefully holds the key to understanding John 20.

To figure out what it was that the disciples believed when they saw, let me first remind you of something that Jesus said after he had washed their feet: ‘You call me Teacher and Lord – and you are right ...’ (John 13:13) ‘Teacher’, or ‘rabbi’ and ‘Lord’, which means something like ‘sir’ in polite English, were the two customary ways Jesus’ disciples addressed him during his earthly life, and reading John 20 in the light of this piece of information is very illuminating.

Take first the encounter between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, which we heard on Easter Sunday. You will remember that she recognised Jesus when he called her name. Then, she turned and said to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabbouni!’ (20:16), or ‘rabbi’, or ‘teacher’ – this presumably was how Mary had always addressed Jesus since she first encountered him a couple of years back. Turn now to the way the other disciples reported their encounter with Jesus to Thomas, ‘We have seen the Lord!’ (20:25) ‘The Lord’ – there it is, this is the way the twelve had always addressed Jesus during their time together.

In other words, when Jesus’ inner band of followers saw and heard him on that first Easter day, they concluded, not unnaturally, that the Jesus they had known and loved for the last three years – their ‘teacher and Lord’ – had indeed risen from the dead. No less, *but no more*. They were, to use a modern phrase, plugging straight back into where they left off last time they met Jesus, on the evening of the first Good Friday. Mary Magdalene demonstrated this quite physically, by holding on to her rabbi in some way, hence Jesus’ words to her, ‘Do not hold on to me ...’ (20:17)

But to conclude simply that they had just got back the same Jesus they had known and loved was simply inadequate. It was not ‘just like’ Lazarus being brought back to life earlier in Chapter 11. There was more, infinitely more, to it than that in the

resurrection of Jesus. And it was Thomas, when he finally saw Jesus, who was the first to reach this conclusion. Notice what happened when Jesus invited Thomas to feel his hands and his side. The text, unlike all subsequent Christian art, did *not* say that he took up the offer. Instead of reaching out his hand, Thomas said to Jesus, ‘My Lord and my God!’

Well, we know where the ‘my Lord’ came from – ‘Lord’ was the familiar form of address Thomas had always used. But ‘my God!’ – where did that come from? None of the other disciples who saw Jesus had said that up to now. What is more, remember that Thomas was a good first-century Jew. For him to call a man God, and a crucified criminal for that matter, was something of a ‘leap’. The evidence in front of his eyes presumably did *not* require him to reach that conclusion – as I said, none of the other disciples concluded that Jesus was God when they saw their teacher and lord again for the first time. But something happened to Thomas at his first encounter that made him utter the first fully-adequate Christian confession of faith – ‘My Lord and my God!’ In this process, even the familiar title of ‘Lord’ takes on a new meaning – it now inevitably has that divine connotation, much more than a polite ‘sir’.

Here, we have to deal with another unfortunate translation. In our reading, we heard Jesus say to Thomas, ‘Do not doubt, but believe!’ (20:27) The original does not say anything of the kind – I checked! There is a perfectly good Greek word for ‘doubt’; it is not used here. Instead, John uses a word that is more often found on the lips of Saint Paul. John’s Jesus says this: ‘Do not be an unbeliever, but be a believer!’ The word ‘unbeliever’ is always used by Paul to refer to someone who is not a Christian, who is outside the Christian church. So, Jesus here is, in effect, inviting Thomas to become the first Christian, something that is only possible after the first Easter day. And Thomas rose to the challenge magnificently – ‘My Lord and my God!’ he said.

So what has any of this to do with looking for resurrection in the present rather than in the past and the future? The connection is this. It is so, so easy for each one of us to settle into a comfort zone for our personal faith. The Jesus we encounter daily, the Jesus we pray to and the Jesus we seek to follow, is the Jesus we have always known since whenever it was that we first believed. That is just like Mary and the disciples continuing to talk of ‘Rabbouni’ and ‘Lord’ after Jesus’ resurrection. That was their comfort zone; it serves as a parable of our own comfort zones. Thomas, on the other hand, was taken out of his comfort zone when he encountered the resurrected Jesus – he faith changed and grew: ‘My Lord *and my God.*’ For a first-century Jew, this was nothing short of having his religion turned up side down. In the process, the old and familiar is not wiped out – the ‘my Lord’ is still there – instead, it takes on new, and deeper, meaning.

To me, therefore, ‘resurrection now’ means allowing our encounters with Jesus to transform what we know of him. Conversely, every time we see someone’s knowledge of Jesus move on to a new stage, we can see that as a sign of resurrection life in the present. Of course, we cannot engineer such transformative encounters – the resurrected Jesus is a free agent not open to our manipulation. He chose when to appear to Thomas. But we can prepare ourselves, so that we are ready when he comes and issues the challenge: ‘Do not be an unbeliever, but be a believer!’

Our passage offers us some hints on what it means to be prepared. Notice that Thomas, uniquely, wanted to ‘see the mark of the nails in his hands’ and put his ‘fingers in the mark of the nails’ and his ‘hand in his side’ (20:25). In other words, Thomas expressed a wish to encounter specifically the *crucified* Jesus. Remember, for a Jew, a man hanging on a tree is cursed by God. When Thomas finally saw the nail marks, he concluded that, despite his Jewish upbringing, *this* crucified man was God.

What that means for us is this. When we are prepared to encounter Jesus in some dark places and wholly unlikely situations, we may expect to come to know him as the resurrected Lord in wholly new ways. The next Chapter in John’s Gospel shows us that for Peter, one such place is the darkness of his own self loathing and despair springing from his earlier threefold denial. Jesus took Peter back there and encountered him as the risen Lord who could forgive deeper than Peter ever imagined. Later, in Chapter 10 of the Acts of the Apostles, Jesus showed the same Peter a vision of a whole collection of unclean food items; there, Peter encountered him as the risen Lord whose invitation to life extended to all nations. Thomas, the hero of our story today, reputedly took this faith to India, further than any of the other apostles had done.

Our encounter with the risen Jesus may or may not take us to India. But if we are open to such encounters, and are prepared to let the risen Jesus challenge and transform our vision of him, then the consequences will be no less profound. Then, the compelling vision of resurrection need not be a one-Sunday-a-year experience.

Risen Jesus, meet us, open our eyes to see you, and transform our vision of you.
Amen.