

2nd Sunday of Easter, Year A (Gospel reading is always the same for 2nd Sunday of Easter, but other readings vary)

Acts 2.14a, 22-32 • John 20.19-31

St Luke's, Chelsea

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'Come and see!' Those of us with young children may have heard these words many times in recent weeks. They're words probably accompanied by a tug on our trousers, and maybe an insistent pointing. 'Come and see!' What is it we are to be demanded to come and see? A bee in the garden, perhaps. Or a gosling in the park. Or a particularly impressive dinosaur skeleton in the local museum. Objects of delight, and wonder, and excitement.

That phrase 'come and see' is a refrain too in John's gospel. 'Come and see' invites Jesus in the first chapter of the gospel to two people as he passes by (John 1.39). 'Come and see' says Philip to Nathanael, urging him too to come and follow Jesus (John 1.46). 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!' exclaims the woman at the well to her astounded neighbours (John 4.29). And, as we heard last Sunday, in Mary Magdalene's slightly different but equally joyful exclamation to the disciples: 'I have seen the Lord' (John 20.18).¹

And now, in today's gospel reading, we have Thomas. He is not with the rest of the disciples when Jesus first appears to them. So in response to their own declaration – 'we have seen the Lord' – Thomas pushes back: '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

¹ For completeness: also John 11.34, where Jesus is invited to 'come and see' where Lazarus has been laid.

believe' (John 20.25b). Ten of the remaining disciples have seen the Lord, but Thomas demands both to see and to touch his risen Saviour.

But what is this seeing that John's gospel deals in? It is not quite the same as that childlike earnestness to point out the wondrous new object: in Christ, in God, we deal not with a 'what' but with a 'who'. For John our seeing has the quality not so much of gazing as of encounter, with all its associated invitations to relationship, to trust, to love.

So when Thomas asks to see Christ, I think, yes, he is asking for proof. He wants to see, and touch, if he is to be willing to accept as truth something which sits outside all categories of human logic and understanding, in the ancient world and today. Like any good empiricist, he wants to see for himself before he will believe the, frankly, unbelievable.

But I hear in Thomas's demands to see and touch something more than just a demand for proof. For Thomas is asking for a new encounter with Christ. Here is Thomas who has given up all he has to follow Christ, Thomas who in his two previous moments of speech in John's gospel has come across as a rather despondent, even Eeyore-like figure (John 11.16, 14.5). I hear Thomas asking to encounter Christ in this new resurrection life, to unpick all his past uncertainty and to reorient himself to the divine life that Jesus truly showed. I hear Thomas yearning to experience some of the same delight, and wonder, and excitement that the other disciples must have experienced on that first Easter evening.

And, what's more, I see John the evangelist deliberately creating a moment where the remaining eleven disciples can be brought back together and re-established all as the witnesses both of Christ's life and his resurrection.² It's a point echoed in the last words of Peter to the Jerusalem crowds in today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles:

² A point made in Rowan Williams, *Resurrection*, 2nd edn (SCM, 2002), p.94.

'This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us [- us disciples] are witnesses' (Acts 2.32). Here are Jesus' first followers, and now here they all are as some of the first to witness the risen Christ.

So a week after that first gathering of the disciples, Jesus does appear again. Thomas receives his proof. He encounters the risen Christ. The disciples are re-united as the foundational community of the followers of Christ. Thomas proclaims: 'My Lord and my God!'

And what about us? We cannot 'see' Jesus in the same manner as those first disciples like Philip and Nathanael; we cannot engage him in animated conversation like the woman at the well; if I were to rush into your house this afternoon and exclaim 'I have seen the Lord!' you might well enquire just how much I overfilled the wine for communion.

But, as we know, John the evangelist shapes his gospel very deliberately. Nothing in his writing is accidental. So it is not surprising that when he comes to write his resurrection stories, John is surely ensuring that these stories pass on the news of those wondrous appearances in the days and weeks after the empty tomb, and that they do so in such a way to convey to his generation of Christians, and those like us to come, what it looks like to have Easter faith in the risen Christ. These resurrection stories are also stories about what it is to be a Christian today.

And, in the first place, that means that we cannot expect to receive proof like Thomas. The church, John seems to be saying, is not going to be sustained by an ongoing series of miraculous appearances like that of Jesus in the locked room. Jesus grants that proof to Thomas. But 'blessed are those who have not seen and yet ... come to believe' (John 20.29).

So from where is that Easter faith going to arise? Above all, surely, from encounter with the God we have come to know through Christ.

When; where, might we encounter God? In our neighbour? In a stranger? In the world around us? In a loved one? Can we, like Thomas, keep our eyes open, and can we yearn to encounter God today?

But we encounter God too in one final place. For as John writes in the final lines of today's gospel: Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name' (John 20.30-31). As the eleven disciples are brought together again to encounter the risen Christ, so in the scriptures we have the church's bringing together of its experience of God, an experience that we are invited to treasure. In reading the scriptures, in these stories we gather together to hear, we are invited to encounter God as God is known in the crucified and risen Christ.

The prologue to John's gospel, which we traditionally hear at Christmas, describes Christ, the bringer of life, the 'light of all peoples' (John 1.4). Through the gospel's stories of Christ's life and death we see that light working its way through in the world. Now, in our Easter joy, we see that light in its glorious undimmable technicolour. We have arrived back at that Prologue's celebration of the 'true light' (John 1.9), but after a long journey. It is as T.S. Eliot puts it: 'The end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.'³

Jesus came. Thomas saw and believed. Now, John asks us: do you see the light?

³ T.S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding'.