

Father God – thank you that you are our Father. Lord Jesus, come to us afresh this morning as we consider your resurrection. May your Spirit that you breathed on your disciples touch our lives afresh that we may acknowledge you as our Lord and our God. Amen

I wonder – what does the Easter story mean to you? Simply a fascinating story which is hard to believe – or does it influence our everyday lives and change the way we live?

One of the great things about the church calendar is that we now spend several weeks reflecting on the resurrection stories. Don't you love them? I do – particularly for the hope they bring! They turn sorrow, suspense, puzzlement, doubt into joy, certainty, hope, confidence ... But it doesn't happen all at once ..

There're so many things that the disciples have to grasp – that they can't take it in all at once. They had witnessed a horrific death but now there were rumours that Jesus was alive – but there was no way that life could go back to where it was. It could never be the same again. Jesus was never going to be with physically or permanently in the same way. A new phase was beginning; a new creation was coming into existence where God didn't dwell with humankind as a single entity but in a collective body of people empowered by His Spirit.

Bishop Tom Wright writes - Jesus's resurrection is the beginning of God's new project not to snatch people away from earth to heaven but to colonise earth with the life of heaven.

So let us go back to that first day of this new beginning. The verse before today's reading describes Mary Magdalene telling the disciples that she had seen the Lord. The message she was given for the disciples was that Jesus was ascending to their God and his; their Father and his. A new relationship with God had come about.

But the disciples' response wasn't belief and excitement. God was now both their God and Father. Jesus was alive... so what did they do? They shut themselves into a room with the doors bolted for fear of the Jews. Jesus had just conquered death – but they were afraid. They just couldn't get their heads round it. And aren't there are days when it just seems too unbelievable to believe the Easter story – but God was gracious towards them and he is to us.

That huge stone over the entrance to the tomb hadn't been able to keep Jesus in – so now the locked doors were no barrier to him. Jesus came and stood among them. His words were not words of rebuke because they couldn't understand – but words of PEACE. Into that situation of their disbelief and fear – Jesus brings peace. And to reassure them that it was truly him, he showed them his hands and his side.

Then they started to comprehend it and overflow with uncontainable joy. You can imagine how that tense atmosphere, fear of every sound, desperate despair was changed now that Jesus was with them and their joy and excitement bubbled over and no doubt could be heard beyond the closed doors.

Now they had individually and personally encountered the risen Christ. They weren't relying what Mary said anymore – they knew it for themselves. And it is important that we individually acknowledge Jesus. We can't rely on the faith of our parents and generations before or that of our friends – we need to know him personally for ourselves.

Then Jesus speaks again – a second greeting of peace – and you wonder what is coming next. We're very good at hearing his words of peace – and we will be sharing them with each other shortly – but often we overlook what he says next – As my Father has sent me, so I send you.

This is God's plan – not Jesus himself in the world – but Jesus in the world living through his people. Jesus was sending those fearful, failing disciples out into the world to be his messengers... it was God's plan and he had no plan B!

You can imagine their panic. Most were fearful of their own shadows... all had run away in the garden leaving Jesus alone .. Peter the impetuous one hadn't even been able to acknowledge Jesus in front of a servant girl....

Then something strange happened. Jesus breathed on them. It may seem odd to us ... but it probably meant a lot to them. In the creation story that they knew so well although God formed man out of the dust of the earth it was only when God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life that the man became a living being. There was also the vision of Ezekiel, one of the Old Testament prophets. He saw hundreds dry bones scattered across a valley which came together and reformed with flesh at God's command but it was only when God breathed into them that they came to life and stood up on their feet – a vast army.

If the disciples attempted to go out and share God's message in their own strength they would definitely fail but God was breathing on them His Spirit – his life – his power. It's that same power that we also need and experience as we open our lives to Him.

The message they had to share was one of forgiveness and acceptance to God. The Jews around were aware of their sin and failings – but is the message of forgiveness is still relevant today? Are people today seeking forgiveness? Possibly not initially but I think that the more we become aware of God in our lives the more we also become aware of our failings. We read that lovely promise which John, who was there when Jesus gave this commission, wrote; when we confess our sins God forgives, cleanses and purifies us because of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus.

What an amazing message they had to share ... but a week later the disciples were still behind closed doors ... But it's so much easier to remain with people who share our beliefs and accept what we do. Anything else is challenging and takes us out of our comfort zone. But let's not forget; God hasn't called us to be a comfortable, closed community. Yes we should share with one another and love one another but the doors need to be always open – not just to welcome people in but for us to go out with the good news.

I worry when I see a church that is inwardly focused. William Temple, a former Archbishop of Canterbury famously said - The Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members.

However the resurrection had only just occurred and no doubt the disciples needed time to get their minds round it and grasp afresh just who Jesus is. Thomas definitely did!

We're not told why he wasn't there that first Sunday. Maybe he liked time to himself to try to think through the events and formalise the questions he had. He wasn't scared to voice his doubts even though he must have felt isolated in a group of people who no doubt were now confident of the resurrection.

Maybe like me, you grew up being told to accept and not to question – but questioning is beneficial as long as we don't stop with the questions – but keep seeking out the meaning.. discussing,

praying, reading the Bible. Our God is bigger than our questions and Thomas needed to discover the reality of the resurrection for himself – second-hand faith isn't satisfying.

I claim that promise – when we seek we will find – and believe that if we truly want to discover the truth about Jesus – God will reveal it to us. But don't expect it to be in the same way as someone else has experienced. God deals with us individually.

Thomas wanted proof – and a week later, after what must have been a long frustrating week when all the other disciples couldn't stop speaking about the resurrection – Jesus appeared again. Once again he greets them with peace – but then Jesus addresses Thomas. There isn't a word of criticism for his doubts and questions. Jesus even offers Thomas to go beyond just seeing his wounds as the other disciples had – he invited Thomas to touch them – the very thing that Thomas had requested.

But Thomas no longer needs too! He is totally overwhelmed and acknowledges something that none of the other disciples had done - Jesus was his Lord and his God.

It was still several weeks before the disciples went out and shared this message – they needed the Holy Spirit to come upon them with power – but what a message they had! We read John's summary - That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life

And the reason John wrote his gospel so that - you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

So what does the Easter story mean to us?

I wonder have you encountered the living Jesus individually, personally or are you relying on a second-hand faith?

As individuals are we open and seeking the spirit of God to empower and fill our lives?

As a church building our doors are open but as a collective group of God's people are we really reaching out to those around us?

Father God – where would we be without the resurrection? May it's message change us from the inside out and may your Spirit so fill us that we will want to share its hope and love with those around us. Amen

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