**Acts 5: 27-32; Revelation 1: 4-8; John 20: 19-end**

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

We are here today at what is sometimes called Low Sunday: maybe because, after the packed churches of Easter Sunday, attendance numbers are Low? or because after the high feasting and celebration of Easter, anything is going to feel low by comparison? There are various theories, but actually we need to remember that this is still Easter week – that we are still within the octave of Easter – the eight days of celebration that started last Sunday.

You may well, in the light of the gospel reading for today, be expecting me to preach about doubt: how it is actually not necessarily negative to doubt, but can be healthy. Thomas was known as the Twin…….and yet the poor man is remembered by many of us as Doubting Thomas. Good man, say I. Once his doubts were addressed – though not in the way he planned or expected – he was the stoutest and most perceptive of believers. My Lord, and my God.

I suppose that what I am about to say might relate in the fullness of time to the doubts and questions we all have sometimes – maybe about the physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ and what that means for us, or about something else entirely. But that is not where I am starting today.

**The doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews.** Fear. The disciples were fearful of people they had perhaps grown up among. Fearful of people who had at least seemed to share their faith and values. Jesus, remember, was a Jew. These disciples still saw themselves as Jews, albeit with sort of a layer of Jesus and his radical teachings on top. God is still God. There **is** only one God. But they had become different because they had met His Son. And now they all lived in fear because that Son had been killed by his own. Had been killed because he dared to be different.

I am mindful that we were, last Sunday, celebrating with both joy and relief, having walked through Holy Week and Good Friday and experienced with Jesus the awful foreboding and the pain, and with the disciples the waiting and hopelessness, which were followed by the overwhelming relief of new life: of victory over death and evil – when all the while news was coming through of the bombings in Sri Lanka. Nearly 400 dead and a further 500 injured. How many thousands is that who have been in some way materially affected, life-changingly affected by those people who planned and delivered those bombs.

What and where is the Easter message in that situation? When we look at these and other appalling acts of persecution and terrorism, what we are looking at is actions that are born mainly of fear, but taken to the point at which fear turns to extreme hatred. It is a fear that is rooted in some strange horror of being corrupted – a fear that difference will in some way infect the racial or cultural purity of a given group of people. A fear that is expressed territorially often, but also in some circumstances by the attempted eradication of that which is different.

Easter, though, speaks of the absolute opposite of that – Easter expresses the embracing of one another in spite of our differences. Almost because of our differences.

The phrase ‘we are an Easter people’ is a trite one – and yet, if we are people who embrace the hope that is embodied in Christ’s resurrection, we are duty-bound to help each other to live without fear and to challenge fear in others, such that we might overcome it wherever it is found.

We Christians have no need to secure our existence: our existence is secured as gift – the gift, first, of Christ’s new life and second of ours.

I said a moment ago: hope embodied in Jesus’ resurrection. And part of what we are talking about in resurrection is bodies: when we talk about resurrection, the body is important. Bodies matter. What the disciples saw was the bodily resurrection of Jesus, complete with wounds – and, yes, a Jesus who could appear seemingly from nowhere, but equally a Jesus who could cook and who ate fish to prove he wasn’t a ghost.

I am minded of the importance of bodies whenever I engage in funeral ministry. I had, as I have said before, an amazing Spiritual Director when I was in Cornwall – a man who had been a hospital and hospice chaplain and from whom I learned a huge amount. When he took a funeral, he talked as though the person was present. And physical contact was important too – he would put his hand on the casket, recognising, acknowledging the bodily presence of the person.

Most of us will recall the pictures that went round the world of the body of a small Syrian child washed up on a beach – or, even further back, the burning body of a child, running towards the camera having been the victim of a napalm attack in the Vietnam war. And you might think it’s because they are children that they are poignant, but I think not exclusively so: there was the little girl whose concern at her grandfather’s funeral was that, I quote, I’ll never hold his warm hand again. It’s about bodies. The human-ness of bodies.

Talking about the resurrection of the body is revolutionary good news. Thomas found bodily resurrection so difficult to believe that he needed to do something almost violent in its intensity in order to be convinced.

And so, inevitably, we have come round to doubt, and back to the lovely Thomas. Earlier in John’s gospel, Thomas was the only disciple with the courage to follow Jesus, no matter the personal cost. Peter the Rock didn’t have it. Neither did John the Beloved. Nor the Sons of Thunder. Nor the one they called the Zealot.

When Jesus hears that his friend Lazarus has died, the other disciples try to talk him out of returning to Bethany to mourn. The last time they were there, all hell broke loose: they were threatened with death and run out of town. The disciples believed that returning to Bethany, even to mourn the death of Lazarus, would result in the death of them all.

So while the other disciples faff around, Thomas speaks up. He alone stands in solidarity with Jesus. Let us go with him, Thomas says, so that we may die with him. These are not the words of a doubter. These are not even the words of a believer. They are the words of a follower of Christ.

In all of the gospels, this is the only moment when one of the disciples, faced with the possibility, affirms Jesus’ inevitable death. Whenever Jesus speaks of his death, his disciples try to talk him out of it. You remember Peter, when Jesus says: get thee behind me, Satan, because Peter didn’t want to hear what Jesus knew.

Thomas’ reaction to the disciples claims to have seen Jesus resurrected is resistance. But not necessarily because he is a sceptic or an unbeliever – rather because he is in deep mourning. Thomas was a man who had resolved to die with Jesus, if that’s what following him meant, when no others would. And when Jesus finally appears to his disciples, Thomas is the only one who missed it.

So why then does Jesus rebuke him? Actually I don’t think he does. I think Jesus is talking to us. Remember that all of scripture is through the lens of whoever wrote it down. Who, after all, are those people who will believe even though they have not seen? Not the disciples, and not Thomas, because they now have all seen.

That means it has to be John's readers – both then and now - which means that Jesus is talking to us. And it is in the form of a blessing. Jesus is blessing us. A blessing that ends John’s gospel – all that is left after that is for John to conclude formally by telling us: Jesus did many other things...not written in this book.

These things are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and, believing, have life in his name.

**Amen**