

Imagine you weren't there: Sermon on John 20: 19-31
for Sunday 7 April 2024 (Rev Phil Wootton)

Imagine you were there. Through services, reflections and meditations from Palm Sunday to Easter Day, we imagine ourselves into the story of Jesus' last days. What was it like? On Maundy Thursday, imagine Jesus offering to wash your feet. Imagine, on Good Friday, yourself bumping into Jesus as he carried his cross to Calvary. As we picture each scene, so often we ask ourselves how we would feel if we were there. Through the question, how would you feel, we connect with the stories of the Bible, because we trust that through all the changes of history, human emotions stay much the same.

So, we come to today's passage, remembering it begins still on Easter Day. As we put ourselves in the place of the disciples, we have to remember, all they know is that the tomb has been opened, and that Jesus' body is not there. And Mary Magdalene is trying to convince the rest that Jesus is alive and she has met the living Jesus. How did they feel? How would we feel? Sceptical about Mary's story, I would imagine. We know they were afraid. They kept the doors locked out of fear of arrest. We can surely add they were confused and bewildered; guilty and remorseful, weary from grief and from mulling over their own failure. Did any of them dare to hope, from Mary's words? Perhaps. Would I?

Then, all of a sudden, Jesus is standing among them. No one has seen him come in. He certainly didn't knock the door. But he's here, large as life, solid and fleshy as ever. How do you feel now? Amazed? Dumbstruck? Wowed? Mind-blown? Doubtful? – thinking this cannot be; am I dreaming or hallucinating, or something? Then he's speaking, saying 'Peace be with you.' It's quite an ordinary greeting, but I get the feeling when Jesus says it – certainly when he said it on this occasion – it's like a river of peace flowing through them, washing away all the anxiety, remorse, despair, fear and everything else negative. This time, we're told how they felt: they were overjoyed. Says it all, I guess – more joy than can be contained. Following that, he repeats the message of peace, and says he's sending them exactly as the Father had sent him, with the breath of the Spirit and the authority to forgive sins.

Now, imagine you were not there when Jesus appeared to his disciples on the first day of the week. Easy, you say: I wasn't. But imagine you were not there and you could have been. Imagine you were Thomas. How does that feel? What they're saying sounds all so unlikely – unbelievable! But they are so sure. They have shared an extraordinary experience together, and you missed it. Increasingly, you become excluded from conversation. Increasingly, you're losing your place in the group. You've become an outsider. It's not surprising Thomas lashed out with angry response: 'Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my hand in the wound in his side, I will not believe.' He's angry because it's started to feel like there was something wrong with him that he wasn't there when Jesus called. He's angry, because he has become ashamed.

That, at least, is the conclusion of sermon by Rev Phil Groves published in *The Preacher* magazine. His sermon gives fresh insights, and I'm going to quote him at length. His theme is about 'shame,' which is different from guilt: guilt is a feeling that comes from knowing you've done something wrong; shame is what other people make you feel.

Rev Groves says that he personally identifies with Thomas – that Thomas's story is his own story, which led him to commit his life to Christ when he was a teenager. He identifies with Thomas as an outsider. He writes this: 'I know what it is to be an outsider. I am dyslexic. People think that dyslexia is about issues with spelling and reading, but those are just trivial symptoms. The brains of dyslexic people process things differently. Our brains struggle with sequencing, but the way we think inspires empathy, creativity, and enables vibrant communication. Autistic people and those with ADHD have different skills and challenges. What we share is that we are minorities: we are 'neurodiverse'. Sadly, systems and structures are often designed by the majority, leading to neurodiverse people being excluded. We are often outsiders... As an outsider, I feel unlovable, and I expect rejection. I sometimes pre-empt that by getting angry with those around me and I make unreasonable demands... Neurodiverse people are conditioned to be ashamed.

'Thomas's response to being the outsider is shame. Ashamed by missing out on the words of peace, the breath of life, and the forgiveness of sin, he responded angrily. Jesus responds with words of peace [for him]. Thomas was offered the opportunity to test the evidence, but Thomas did not need that. The words of peace removed his shame. If Jesus is prepared to come to Thomas [personally] with words of peace, he is prepared to come to me. Thomas was no longer an outsider, and nor am I. We both say, "My Lord and my God." Jesus makes the connection between Thomas and us. He believed when he saw, we are blessed by believing without seeing. This story is our story, by order of Jesus.'

Rev Groves concludes: 'Thomas is remembered in South India and Sri Lanka for going to the ends of the earth to proclaim, 'Jesus is Lord.' ... Even today, neurodiverse people are often at the cutting edge of mission. We are prepared to go to the limits in service of the one who took away our shame. ... We are not alone. The most profound responses to Jesus were always from people released from shame. It is the same now. If you want to see Jesus today look to refugees, prisoners, and those in the care system who have had their shame removed by the words, Peace be with you. Outsiders continue to be shamed in society and by the church, but all are loved by Jesus. The story of Thomas is our story.'

So, imagine you were not there when Jesus appeared to the others. How do you feel? Be reassured: Jesus has got it covered. But imagine all those who miss out on meeting the living Lord. How will they receive his peace?