

The lectionary Gospels for Easter and the second and third Sundays thereafter all tell resurrection stories as befits the Easter Season. But this reading is the only one to be used every year; the Sunday after Easter, each year, this is the story we hear. This seems odd because I'm sure it's not our favourite resurrection story – it's certainly not mine. There is something much more satisfactory about the story of the Road to Emmaus or the Picnic by the Lakeside. But here we are once again, with the disciples behind locked doors somewhere in Jerusalem, imagining their fear, their lostness. Perhaps this year more than ever we can appreciate something of their fear and bewilderment as throughout this year we have been closeted in our homes for fear of contracting COVID-19. And there in the midst of this fear and bewilderment, Jesus arrives, bringing peace the traditional greeting of 'Shalom' to his friends.

An artist was commissioned by a wealthy man to paint something that would depict peace. After a great deal of thought, the artist painted a beautiful country scene. There were green fields with cows standing in them, birds were flying in the blue sky and a lovely little village lay in a distant valley. The artist gave the picture to the man, but there was a look of disappointment on his face. The man said to the artist, "This isn't a picture of true peace. It isn't right. Go back and try again.

The artist went back to his studio, thought for several hours about peace, then went to his canvas and began to paint. When he was finished, there on the canvas was a beautiful picture of a mother, holding a sleeping baby in her arms, smiling lovingly at the child.

He thought, surely, this is true peace, and hurried to give the picture to the wealthy man. But again, the wealthy man refused the painting and asked the painter to try again.

The artist returned again to his studio. He was discouraged, he was tired and he was disappointed. Anger swelled inside him, he felt the rejection of this wealthy man. Again, he thought, he even prayed for inspiration to paint a picture of true peace. Then, all of a sudden an idea came, he rushed to the canvas and began to paint as he had never painted before. When he finished, he hurried to the wealthy man.

He gave the painting to the man. He studied it carefully for several minutes. The artist held his breath. Then the wealthy man said, "Now this is a picture of true peace." He accepted the painting, paid the artist and everyone was happy.

And what was this picture of true peace?? The picture showed a stormy sea pounding against a cliff. The artist had captured the fury of the wind as it whipped black rain clouds which were laced with streaks of lightning. The sea was roaring in turmoil, waves churning, the dark sky filled with the power of the furious thunderstorm.

And in the middle of the picture, under a cliff, the artist had painted a small bird, safe and dry in her nest snuggled safely in the rocks. The bird was at peace midst the storm that raged about her.

Jesus came to the disciple in the midst of the confusion of the rumours of the resurrection. Jesus came to them midst of the chaos of their lives and said, "Peace be with you". Like that mother bird, Jesus came to the disciples while they were dealing with the stormy seas of doubt, the churning waves of hope, and said "Peace be with you."

According to the text it says, "When he said this he showed them his hands and his side." They see his wounds – the resurrection body of our Saviour still bearing the marks of his resurrection. I love this verse: it means that in all that God does to make us anew, in this life and the next, our wounds are never dismissed or obliterated. They are part of who we are, part of our uniqueness, and are loved by God just as much as our strengths – our good bits. We all have both and both are objects of God's love for us. The disciples were now at peace with themselves. Jesus was indeed risen. They were at peace with Him and within their souls.

And then Jesus blesses those present on the evening of that first Easter Day, with the gift of the Spirit. This is known as the Johannine Pentecost – a posh way of telling us that this is how John recounts the coming of the Spirit. This is a little confusing for us as we're used to thinking about the Spirit coming at Pentecost – weeks away from now. I think we need not worry about this seeming inconsistency. Different people remember things in different ways, and the storytellers who are our Gospel writers used their material differently to make slightly different points. Besides this, the Spirit comes to us continually if we are open to God's presence – here is the renewing presence of God, with us moment by moment if we have eyes to see and ears to hear.

Thomas was missing on that first Easter evening. We call him the doubter, but that's a bit unfair. He just wasn't someone who followed the crowd – he liked to think for himself. Maybe he was angry with himself that he hadn't been with the others and he missed out so as the text says; But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the print of the

nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe." Thomas was not at peace. He was struggling with his faith. He had questions that no one could answer for him. Then as the text says; Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. The doors were shut, but Jesus came and stood among them, and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

Jesus came eight days later and gave that peace that passes all human understanding to Thomas. Thomas could now be at peace as he exclaimed that Jesus was his Lord and God. All his doubts were gone and his questioning of events leads to a beatitude or blessing, which is really important for most Christians now and in the past. Blessed are those who have not seen but who believe. And I guess that's most of us. Some have had visions – think of St Paul on the road to Damascus. But most of us believe for a different reason. We believe because people have told us – we have heard the stories of Jesus and we feel called to follow.

We believe because those first disciples do what Jesus asked them to do in the reading we've heard today – to go, to be sent out into the world to proclaim God's love and forgiveness to everyone. So you see, for us this sending out is still God's imperative. We have heard the Good News because someone has told us. How can others hear this Good News if we don't carry on telling the story of God's love shown to us in the life of our Saviour?

And yet we don't find it easy to talk about our faith. We're reticent to talk about something which is so personal to us, so deeply rooted in our souls. Like those first disciples we're hiding somewhere in fear. So we need to ask God to fill us with the Spirit of love, forgiveness and hope; the Spirit of boldness; most of all, perhaps, the Spirit of Wisdom so that we may know what to say and when to speak. We don't need long words, or abstract ideas, just the conviction that each of us is loved by God, and that this great love changes everything.

Helen Keller wrote, "If we trust, if we relinquish our will and yield to the Divine will, then we find that we are afloat on a buoyant sea of peace and under us are the everlasting arms."

Thomas relinquished his doubts, his fears, to questions to the Lord and he was at peace in the everlasting arms of his Lord and Saviour.

We need to be like Thomas. We can have peace in our lives, an inner peace if we surrender our will to Christ.

Jesus says "Peace be with you."