

EASTER 2 - 11.4.99
E/L H.C.
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ACTS 2:14-32
JOHN 20:19-31

DEALING WITH DOUBT

A journalist from Pristina who escaped to this country earlier this week said she and her family had lived each day of the last couple of weeks waiting for the banging at the door, knowing it would sooner or later be their turn to leave, for whatever people decided would happen to them in the future. They were numb with all the horrific events of the past days. Then it came...the knock at the door...and off they went.

John 20 gives us a situation not all that far removed, as disciples in Palestine waited in fear, behind locked doors, the night that Jesus appeared to them raised from the dead.

It's a story for every one of us who ever has doubts about their God and their faith; for every one who ever wonders what the point is in trying to live a Godly life.

Here's the story so far: a random assortment of disciples had followed Jesus to Jerusalem, trusting his every move. Then before their eyes, he was arrested and crucified. They scattered, but now had come together again - safety in numbers, perhaps. But they were still in shock... grief...fear... afraid that they were the next targets. It was a very political situation. These were people who now had every reason to doubt Jesus, however much they wanted to believe everything would be alright.

Mary had come back from her encounter with the risen Lord and told everyone she had seen him but they weren't sure...
Doubt is not easy to deal with. In fact, doubting anyone's word or deed is harder, more uncomfortable than not believing at all, because it's about being in two minds. Wanting to believe but struggling with it, because all around are things happening that seem to contradict our beliefs in that person.

We've all met folk like that - if we're not like it ourselves. The one who thinks good news stories just seem too good to be true. Or the person who is so cynical that only seeing is believing. They won't dare be too joyful in case the bubble bursts.

Sometimes we don't have a problem believing in good things, but we get totally thrown when something difficult happens. When something contradictory to our beliefs happens.

When a baby is born too early and dies; when there's cruelty between one human being and another; when someone we trusted implicitly does something that seems out of character; when there's problem after problem in one family and not in another. We begin to wonder how a loving God can let these things happen. We see things that don't seem to square up with our beliefs. It's easy to doubt.

That's how the disciples were. Full of confusions, they must have wondered if all the past few years with Jesus had been an illusion? Had they been duped?

How do we get from anxious doubters who don't know whether to believe or not, to strong leaders of the first Christian churches?

By meeting Jesus. Suddenly he is there, giving words of peace. Peace that means more than it ever has before - because it is being offered by someone who is there in front of them as a conqueror of death.

He demonstrates how the life of the Holy Spirit will come to them, and life is changed. Significantly, the only other recorded words are about the power to forgive sins. That's what Jesus' whole life and message have been about. Christianity is about forgiveness – by God, by each other, and only with God's power in us can we make it happen.

For the disciples, this is all an antidote to their fear.

Yet Thomas missed it. He was away trying to fight his demons alone. Even when the other tell him what happened he is not convinced. For him, only seeing is believing.

How many times might we miss the moment of God's reassurance to us by staying away from the places we could find help? The one Sunday we don't feel like bothering with church could be the day we miss the message that is just for us. The one time we stay alone instead of joining others could be the time that a friend can give a word of encouragement or comfort.

Yet for the benefit of Thomas, Jesus returns and now Thomas knows for sure. He will be a different man from now on. He believes that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, and he has life, real life because of it.

Well, maybe it was easy for the disciples, who saw Jesus, face to face. What about us, when we feel cynical, or want to insulate ourselves from disappointments, or when we struggle to believe God cares?

Simon Weston , a Welsh Guardsman, was the subject of a t.v. programme this week about his life in the last 17 years since he was horribly burned in a bomb attack on his ship in the Falklands conflict. He can't use his hands properly, he is badly disfigured; 80% of his body is scarred, either from burns or from skin grafts, his friends died and his own job as a soldier came to an end.

Yet he is married, with children, runs marathons for charity and a few years ago met the man who was the aircraft pilot who dropped the bomb on his ship. Then after a second meeting, embraced him as a friend.

He said: 'I understand what it is to go forward now. I understand what it is to face up to the problems and difficulties in life... The future is what's all-important now... The price of conflict is what you see me indelibly stamped with. The price of reconciliation is being able to make friends with those who were once your enemy - those you were sworn to kill... For me the conflict was a staging post in my future. The price I paid is minimal if we can have a lasting peace... My life has been made much richer through being injured...'

I do not know how he could say those things after what he suffered. I don't know if he is a Christian. But I do know that it is a wonderful picture of the

Christian message. For Jesus' first disciples - and for every one of us, his present ones, the future *is* what matters. Jesus' scars were indelibly stamped on him, too, the marks of recognition, the marks of conflict; but he paid a price for reconciliation with people who would otherwise be God's enemies. And the conflict? Yes, that was also a staging post on the way to resurrection and lasting peace with God.

If it is true that Jesus rose from the dead, then somehow, even through darkest moments of worst suffering and doubt, life may be transformed and made richer, even it takes the rest of our lives to see it.

The resurrection of Jesus means there is a terrific and joyful future. Let us go on helping each other to discover it and share it, to see Jesus and believe, even when the present is a struggle that makes us doubt it.