

1 John 1.1-2.2; John 20.19-31

The fear you can sense at the beginning of our gospel reading, the way the disciples' whole world had fallen apart, is perhaps more relatable to us in a post-pandemic world which is seemingly ever-increasingly polarised.

There the disciples were, huddled in a locked room, shut away from everyone else, afraid of the outside finding its way in. They are caught in an unrecognisable unknown. Everything they had done for the last few years - spending every moment with Jesus, eating, talking, travelling together - has ended. They don't know what lies ahead, and they don't know how to move forwards.

Not only that, but the disciples are struggling to believe what seem like crazy stories. They have heard rumours that Jesus has disappeared and the tomb was empty, from Mary and from Peter and the beloved disciple. But Mary is the only one who claims to have seen Jesus that morning, and even she has to admit that she didn't recognise him at first. Would you believe that someone had risen from the dead under those

circumstances?! It's no wonder they lock themselves away.

But it is here that we find the persistent, transforming hope of Easter. For in the midst of all this fear, the disciples find themselves experiencing Jesus again - who somehow comes among them in their locked room, changed and unpredictable, but definitely Jesus, saying 'Peace be with you'. Put aside your fear, and be at peace. What an emotional whirlwind!

But poor Thomas isn't there on Easter day, to experience the first time Jesus appears in this manner, so of course he doesn't believe the wild stories he is then told. His friends can't convince him. "Unless I get to touch the actual wounds in his body", he says "I don't believe you".

The others have had an encounter of hope that Thomas doesn't understand when he is told about it, because who would believe such a thing when you see no way out of the darkness? Thomas is in mourning, in shock, surrounded with his grief and anger, and cannot imagine a new world. This is the situation when Jesus comes again a week later to the same room, where they are all huddled together.

When Jesus arrives the second time, I think there's a couple of different ways we can read what he says to Thomas. It could be like a scolding - "How can you not have believed what the others told you?! For goodness sake, here I am! Now do you get it, you foolish man?"

Or perhaps, and I think this much more likely, it is a gentle explanation. I think Jesus comes this second time just for Thomas, specially for this disciple who has missed out and needs to be brought into the light. Jesus arrives, smiles at his friends, greets them with peace, and then without a hint of admonishment kindly draws Thomas aside to put his arms around his shoulders, and look into his eyes, and tell him, show him, that he is real. The fear is ended.

There is no judgement, only a drawing alongside, a companionship, while Jesus reveals the wondrous truth. Perhaps Thomas had wished that he could believe what the other disciples had been telling him, but it was too much of a struggle. So Jesus comes to help him in his unbelief, to meet him where he is.

It is comforting, I think, that the disciples were such a strange bunch of people who kept getting it wrong, who

were selfish, squabbling, tired, confused, and doubting. They were simply human beings, just like any of us, but it's them Jesus chose, it's them he appears to, it's them he teaches, loves, and gives the gospel to proclaim to the world. It's these very normal people who are entrusted with the Kingdom of God. This is why the disciples, and at times perhaps Thomas most of all, allow us to see ourselves in the gospel story. They allow us to see ourselves in relation to Jesus.

We are not left to struggle on our own. This experience of Jesus coming into the midst of a group of frightened people, bringing hope, peace, and the gift of the Spirit, is like a promise. It's a promise that we are never alone when we are huddled in our own darkneses and fears. It's a promise that even if the world becomes strange and altered, as it has done so many times before through the ages, God walks alongside us through it all.

An encounter with Jesus is all it takes to believe the impossible. What seemed like a ridiculous story is then changed into a lived experience that the disciples know as the truth of Jesus among them.

And perhaps for ourselves or for others we know, the Easter story has at some point seemed crazy and ridiculous. But the proof is in Jesus, who comes among

us through the Spirit. Jesus breathes out the Spirit, and life fills our lungs as we breathe it in, standing in his presence.

So take a quiet moment, and put yourself in Thomas' shoes, to see Jesus gently looking into your eyes, standing alongside you and greeting you with peace.

In inviting Thomas to touch his wounds, Jesus allows us to acknowledge and hold all that is broken and wounded, and to understand that God holds it too, embodied as carrying the pain in his very hands. Yet what persists is hope. Hope, peace, and the sure knowledge that even if things are never the same again, there will be a new way of being that is bound up in the gift of the Spirit and the unconquerable love of God in Jesus.

The resurrection is a promise that we are never alone. That God persists, offering life in the face of death. That in our darkest moments, Christ is among us, holding our fears in his hands and bringing us light and peace.

This is the joy of Easter, that we are reassured and recommissioned to take our faith outside this building with us, and to share it wherever we go, with everyone

we encounter. We are bearers of the Spirit's presence in a world that needs to know Easter for itself - the message of peace, hope, and love. Thomas saw and believed. May others see us, and believe too, as they meet Christ's light in our own eyes which have known the risen Lord.

Amen.