



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, April 19, 2020
The Second Sunday of Easter

Solemn Eucharist
at 11:00 a.m.

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*
on
Acts 2:14a, 22-32, 1 Peter 1:3-9, and John 20:19-31
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“For things to remain the same, everything must change.”

I woke up to those words from Giuseppe Di Lampedusa’s novel, ‘The Leopard’, as I listened to the news on the radio, words now attributed the World Health Organization in response to the Coronavirus pandemic.

“For things to remain the same, everything must change.”

The question is, do we actually want things to remain the same or, as is more often stated, ‘go back to normal’? It is clear that the debate is now shifting to talk of relaxing the lockdown and getting the world ‘back to business as usual.’ But the medical experts tell us that we should not expect things to go back to normal and that social distancing may very well become the norm until such time as a vaccine is created, which may not be until late 2021. And, in any case, what does ‘going back to normal’ or ‘things remaining the same’ look like to the poorest in our society? The homeless and the refugee? The 114,000 children in our New York school system that are, strictly speaking, homeless and never quite know where they will be sleeping one week to the next? What does it look like to the jobless, or those caught in a spiral of debt, addiction, or domestic abuse? Why would these people want things to remain the same?

When Jesus was taken down from the cross on Good Friday and laid in the tomb, the hopes and aspirations of his followers were crushed. Crushed so much that no-one recognized him on the third day when he rose again and appeared to them. It is remarkable that, in the Gospel accounts, even the soldiers guarding the tomb missed the event – they carried on sleeping! Peter and John ran to the tomb, Peter went *into* the tomb, and yet they both simply drifted off back home. Mary Magdalene could not see through her tears that Jesus was standing in front of her. For the first disciples of Jesus, it was over. He was dead. That was that.

But the bodily resurrection of Jesus changed everything. The message of Easter is that change is possible for humanity and the message of Easter brings with it hopeful-living. It is part of the DNA of the baptized Christian; it is our salvation history. The incarnation, the death and resurrection of Jesus *changed everything*.

Above the piano in the Rectory, we have a painting of Thomas and Jesus in the upper room; a depiction of the Gospel story that we heard today. There are many paintings of the incredulity of Thomas, the most famous probably being the one painted by Caravaggio in which Jesus is guiding the finger of Thomas to explore the gaping, fleshy wound in his side.

Why did Thomas need to see the wounds?

As a priest, I have sometimes had to inform someone that someone they love has died. Sudden and unexpected death can cause terrible shock and incredulity. I remember once visiting a woman with her three young children – they were huddled on the sofa. The woman’s husband, the children’s dad, had cheerfully gone off to work that morning on his motorbike, waving to them as he always did. He never returned. Sitting with the family was excruciating. Here in New York, people have died and families have been unable to say goodbye or even pay their respects to the body.

There is an incredulity that is all so human when someone we love is taken away from us suddenly and we are unprepared. The great psychiatrist, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross was right to put *denial* as the first stage of grief.¹

It is natural to want to see the body – even to see the wounds on the lifeless corpse in order to come to terms with what has happened. Isn’t that why in John’s Gospel, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus anoint the body and wrap it in a shroud? Isn’t that why in Mark and Luke’s gospels, the women came to the tomb with their spices? Isn’t that why Peter and John ran to the tomb, and Mary Magdalene was so distraught that she could not see through her tears?

We often call Thomas ‘the doubting Thomas’. Not so! He is the honest and faithful Thomas who wants to believe, the Thomas who wanted to see the real Jesus - the Jesus who had promised him so much. There is another moment in the Gospel of John when we glimpse this honesty of Thomas. When Jesus was talking of going away and preparing a place for his followers, it was Thomas who was brave enough to put into words what the others were probably thinking but afraid to say. He said, *“Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”* To which Jesus replied with those amazing words, *“I am the way, and the truth, and the life!”*

Thomas wanted to see the one who was the way the truth and the life. He wanted to see the real Jesus and that meant he needed to see the wounds of love that were still fresh. He needed to see that the promises of Jesus were true in spite of the wounds and, more importantly, because of them. It is because of the freshness of those wounds that Thomas was able to express his faith – not his doubt – *“My Lord and my God!”*

Everything had changed and it meant that the whole of humanity was changed because of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

When Jesus rose from the dead, his resurrected body was not a resuscitated corpse but a different kind of body. The disciples do not meet a ghost; the resurrected Jesus eats a fish; he can be handled; he has flesh and bones; he lights a fire and cooks breakfast; he breaks the bread; he can pass through closed doors – it was a different kind of body, and he did not encourage them to cling to that body. It was, nevertheless, the real Jesus that met with them and his humanity had been perfected in God’s redeeming purposes.

N.T. Wright says this about the resurrection:

*“The risen Jesus was more human, not less, than he was before: his risen humanness is the affirmation of his previous humanness, only now without the frailty and the dying which before then he shared with the rest of us. His resurrection is thus God’s way of saying that there is such a thing as genuine humanness, that human life is not a Sartrean sick joke, promising everything and giving nothing.”*²

Which means that for Thomas, and therefore for you and for me, everything has changed and this allows for hopeful living. Our humanity has been redeemed – we are no longer estranged from God our Creator. Instead, Jesus the Redeemer makes us fully alive and promises us new life. Listen to the words of Peter from the Epistle: *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and*

unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”

The Resurrection changed everything and allows all humanity the chance to live hopefully. As Rowan Williams once said, *“your own humanity is more interesting and more alive than you could ever imagine, and... in discovering that, you actually find new ways of connecting with the earth and with the people around you”*.³

Finding new ways of connecting with the earth and with the people around us is what is happening at the moment during this pandemic. It is what is required if we are to transfigure that phrase, *‘for things to remain the same, everything must change’*. But they already have - if only we have the faith of Thomas.

Let me end by sharing a sonnet written by Malcolm Guite, titled, Sonnet for St. Thomas Day:

“We do not know... how can we know the way?”
Courageous master of the awkward question,
You spoke the words the others dared not say
And cut through their evasion and abstraction.
Oh doubting Thomas, father of my faith,
You put your finger on the nub of things
We cannot love some disembodied wraith,
But flesh and blood must be our king of kings.
Your teaching is to touch, embrace, anoint,
Feel after Him and find Him in the flesh.
Because He loved your awkward counter-point
The Word has heard and granted you your wish.
Oh place my hands with yours, help me divine
The wounded God whose wounds are healing mine.

1. Her seminal work, *‘On Death and Dying’* first published in 1962, was required reading at my seminary and is still probably one of the finest books written on the processes of death and grieving.

2. *‘Following Jesus: Biblical reflections on discipleship,’* page 107.

3. From an interview with the *‘Network of Wellbeing,’* January 29, 2014.