

**ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH,
Handout for Sunday 19th. April 2020: Easter 2[B]
Morning Service 11.15**

Introduction:

During the Coronavirus pandemic, when we are unable to hold our Church services, we join in spirit with other Christian people all over the world, and especially family and friends who are separated from us. I invite you to use this service in whatever way is best for you, and pass it on to others if you wish to do so. You may like to look up the hymns and read – or sing them. God bless you all.

Let us pause for a moment and know that God is here.

Prayer:

As the disciples in the locked room reached out and touched you,
let us reach out and touch you today, living Lord Jesus.
Let us feel your scarred hands and feet.
Let us put our hands in your side.
Let us be still and know that you are our Lord and our God.

Amen.

Call to worship

Gathered in our separate places, yet united in our fellowship,
Come, embrace the risen Christ.
Come, embrace the Prince of peace.
Come, embrace his pierced hands.
Come, meet your Lord and your God.

Let us worship God:

1 Hymn 457 All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name

First Prayer + Lord's Prayer

Risen Lord, as we gather today in our separate places,
may we see you and hear you,
may we know your presence with us now.

As the disciples in the locked room reached out and touched you,
let us reach out and touch you today, living Lord Jesus.
Let us feel your scarred hands and feet;
put our hands in your side.
Let us be still and know that you are our Lord and our God.

Prince of peace, in your presence we remember with regret
times when we choose not to forgive, but to hold on to old grudges;
times when we doubt you and do not trust,
choosing to rely on our own resources and not on you;
asking for proof before we will believe,
thinking that we can believe only when we have proof.

In these times of apprehension and concern In the face of the Covid pandemic,
help us to put ourselves, and those we love, in your hands.
Help us to forgive more readily, and to trust more willingly.

Loving God,
we praise and adore you for your great compassion;
for giving us new birth into a living hope.
As the glorious truth of the resurrection astounds us,
may we never lose the wonder of what you have done for us,
of the wonderful, lasting inheritance you provide for us.

God of blessings,
we thank you for the promise of Jesus Christ,
the life by which we live, and the perfection of your glory.
We thank you for the faith to believe that which we have not seen,
as we are reminded again of the significance of your love.
Grant us anew your sustaining strength as we try to lead lives which reflect your glory,
and the continuing presence of the Spirit, our guide, helper and advocate,
as we live through these difficult times.

All these our prayers we bring in the name of the Risen Christ, who taught us to pray saying:
*Our Father which art in Heaven, Hallowed be thy Name,
Thy Kingdom come, Thy Will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors and lead us
not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For Thine is the Kingdom the Power and the Glory for ever Amen.*

2 Hymn 448 Shine Jesus Shine

Readings:

Acts 4:32-35:(NRSVA)

The Believers Share Their Possessions

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

John 20:19-31

John 20:19-31 New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised (NRSVA)

Jesus Appears to the Disciples

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

Jesus and Thomas

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, 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. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

The Purpose of This Book

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

3 Hymn 432 How often we, like Thomas (Tune Penlan, 551)

Message:

As we read the Easter story, we quickly realise that the Risen Jesus was not exactly the same as he was before the crucifixion. The Risen Jesus can enter a locked room, and he seems to be able to appear and to disappear, and his friends can meet him without recognising him. Yet he can be touched. Thomas needed to touch him.

We know Thomas as Doubting Thomas, and we're taught not to be like him. He gets a bad press. Today's story is supposed to show that those of us who never had the chance to meet Jesus in the flesh are still richly blessed, because we have faith that Jesus does exist for us as a living presence.

The gospels tell us a little bit about Thomas. When Jesus hears that Lazarus is ill and decides to go to visit him, the disciples try to persuade him not to go. It's dangerous - his enemies are out to get him.

One voice speaks up – Thomas:

'Let us also go, that we may die with him.' (John 11:16)

Thomas is not lacking in courage.

Later, when Jesus is trying to explain to the disciples what is going to happen to him, and trying to comfort them, he tells them:

I go to prepare a place for you, and I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

And you know the way to the place where I am going.' (14:2)

The disciples haven't a clue what he is talking about. But down-to-earth Thomas raises the awkward, common-sense question that the others hesitate to ask.

'Lord, we don't know where you are going. How can we know the way?' (14:5)

Jesus responds with one of the greatest things he ever said, one of the best-known statements in the Bible:

'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also.'

Some people say Thomas was dim. No! – I think Thomas was a man who thought for himself. He asked questions.

Nobody needs to be ashamed of his or her doubts. We all have doubts. Peter had his doubts when he stepped out of that boat on to the water. The disciples have just had their doubts about Mary's account of the empty tomb.

There are plenty of instances of doubts in the Bible. And plenty of instances of reassurance as well.

Thomas was a practical chap. He needed to check things out for himself. After all, he is only asking for what his friends have already experienced. On that first Easter Sunday evening, when the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Thomas was not there.

Why? Where was he? Hiding? Afraid? Disillusioned?

For all that he had expected it, the death of Jesus had left Thomas heart-broken. Nowadays we might say he was in shock: PTSD. Dazed, hurt, bitter. I think that is why he was not with the others. He couldn't handle it. He had to face his grief on his own. Maybe he was wrong. There might have been strength in the fellowship with the others. A burden shared is a burden halved. Maybe there's another lesson for us: by separating himself from the community he missed the opportunity of being among the first to meet with the risen Lord.

There's a saying that if something seems too good to be true, then usually it isn't true. I can imagine Thomas, the realist, the practical man, belligerent in his grief. I can hear his response when the other disciples tell him, "We have seen the Lord."

Don't be daft! He's dead! He was crucified! The Romans don't make any mistakes! Pull the other one! Now clear off and leave me alone!

They persist. 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

I used to be a vet. My scientific training discouraged me from taking other people's word for things. Lots of times I've had a farmer - or a dog owner, or somebody with a horse -flustering around telling me not to waste time examining the animal, because it is bound to be suffering from X. But my training insists that I be absolutely sure that the cow *does* have milk-fever and not a bacterial septicaemia that may look similar but needs vastly different treatment.

A while back I had a minor problem with the electrical wiring in our house. I had a look, and decided against trying to fix it myself, and called the electrician. When he came in, I told him that I had already switched off the power. Unobtrusively, he checked for himself. I had turned off the wrong switch. He was right to check for himself.

We need folk like Thomas. Uncompromisingly honest. He absolutely refused to say that he understood what he didn't understand, or that he believed what he didn't believe. Thomas had to be sure - and I think he was right.

The person who recognises his or her doubts and works through them comes to a sounder, deeper, and more secure faith than the person who glibly repeats some piece of dogma, without properly thinking it through.

Thomas checked for himself. He made the test - and he became convinced. He doubted in order to become sure, and when he was convinced, he went the whole way. When Jesus invites Thomas to touch his wounds, we are not told that he actually does so, but his response is immediate, complete, whole-hearted:

'My Lord and my God!'

Thomas is the first disciple to put into words the truth that Jesus is both Lord **and** God. The greatest confession of faith recorded anywhere in the Bible. '*My Lord and my God!*'

Some people have the privilege – the blessing - of coming to Jesus Christ through what we call a Damascus Road experience: a blinding vision, an instantaneous conversion. Some Christians even suggest that you're not really a Christian unless you can testify to your own personal Damascus-Road conversion.

I think most of us don't have that kind of experience. Some people struggle for many years with honest doubts and misgivings. There will never be a time in this life when every doubt is eliminated. Faith is a commitment in uncertainty, perceived by the heart rather than the head. A person who fights through doubts and misgivings, who reasons – openly, or in his own mind – against the arguments of the atheists, the agnostics, the scoffers, and comes to the conviction that Jesus Christ is Lord, attains a special kind of faith, and a certainty that can never be reached by those who unthinkingly accept what they are told.

I don't know what happened on that first Easter Sunday, or the next, or how it was that Jesus met and walked with two of his friends on the Emmaeus road and they didn't recognise him. I don't know how it was that Jesus came and stood among the disciples even though the doors were locked. I wasn't there to see for myself. But I know that something quite literally world-changing happened, because nearly 2000 years later we, and millions of Christians all over the world, come to honour and to worship. I know it from the testimony of all those witnesses in the early church – not only from what they said, but from the way they behaved. The way their lives were changed. One of them was Thomas.

Jesus said to Thomas, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'
Notice – not *better*: just blessed.

That doesn't mean we are to have blind, unthinking faith. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

What the church needs today is not a rigid, blinkered adherence to dogma, but hearts and minds genuinely open and receptive to change, open to scientific discovery, open to other people's views. Jesus repeatedly condemned the Scribes and Pharisees for refusing to countenance anybody's views but their own. We see the same attitude all too tragically in the fanaticism of religious extremists – not just Muslims, but extreme Christian groups as well.

No! To follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ is to allow yourself to be continually challenged, stretched, and surprised. There are lessons to be learned from the present lockdown because of Covid-19. We see selfishness and panic buying, but we also see care in the community, and people helping out folk who are housebound, not just now, but all the time.

Easter is a time for taking a fresh look at what we believe.

What if you're still not sure?

Why not take the scientific approach: look at the facts that can be established, and work from there? A man called Jesus walked on the earth. He said and did certain things; he died at the command of Pontius Pilate; he was reported to have risen from the dead.

The Gospels show us a man who speaks about God; who deals in the fundamental human problems and human relationships that we all know. He talks about happiness; about money; about good and evil; about helping others; about death. He is man with a special attitude in his works and words towards life and towards the world in general, and towards God.

Anyone reading the Gospel record for the first time would reach these conclusions, without having any convictions about their significance.

But is there more to it than that? Was he really what he proclaimed himself to be? Is he the Son of God? How is he alive today in any real meaning of the word alive? What is he saying to us as we live our daily lives? How do we know it is true?

The Thomas in each of us asks these questions.

Why not do the experiment? Put the hypothesis to the test in our lives. Live as though it were all true, just as the scientist behaves as though his hypothesis is true. This is the experiment that Thomas invites us to make.

I believe that if we make the experiment earnestly and seriously and sincerely, asking and seeking, we do find that the words and ways of Jesus ring true in our lives in all our different experiences. When we commit to living in this way, we do find that what Jesus said and did is entirely relevant and meaningful to all of life. Our trial, our hypothesis, is verified by our own experience.

Our Church, thanks be to God, is a place where we have the freedom to ask questions, struggle with our doubts and our dilemmas, share our experiences – online if necessary during the 'lockdown' - and come to a new awareness of the presence of Jesus Christ in our lives.

Imagine yourself there to hear those words for the first time: 'We have seen the Lord.'

How do you respond? Impossible – don't be daft? Leave me alone? I'm not ready? I'm scared?

Or, with Thomas, can you say, 'My Lord and my God!'

I leave you to choose.

Amen. Soli Deo Gloria.

4 (Offering) Hymn 438 The Head that once was crowned with thorns

Dedication of Offering:

We give thee but thine own,
whate'er the gift may be;
all that we have is thine alone,
a trust, O Lord, from thee.

And we believe thy Word,
though dim our faith may be;
whate'er for thine we do, O Lord,
we do it unto thee. Amen.

Intercessory Prayer

As we face the Coronavirus (COVID-19) is appropriate to use again the prayer by the the Moderator, Rt Rev Colin Sinclair:

Living God,

In our hour of need we turn again to you, for we have nowhere else to turn.
We put our faith in you, because you have proved your faithfulness time and again.
We reaffirm our love for you because you have never let us go.

We thank you that you are not distant from us.
but have drawn near, in your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ.
He has shared our life, tasted our death and defeated it;
He understands our worries and our fears.
Help us to respond as your children now.

We pray for this pandemic spreading across our world,
remembering all who have lost loved ones.
and praying for those seriously ill at this time.

We uphold the National Health Service.
as it responds to this added pressure on its already overstretched services.
We pray for doctors and nurses and all in the caring professions,
who work to help and support people as best they can.

We remember those working behind the scenes.
testing samples, confirming results, giving information to patients.
We uphold others trying to understand this virus better,
working to create an effective remedy.

We pray for our Governments in Westminster and Holyrood,
as they work with the best medical advice
to guide us on how we should respond
and what action we should take.
We pray that these guidelines might be taken seriously
and that all would put them into action.

May this crisis bring out the best in us, not the worst.
Help us to live by faith and not by fear;
to build bridges not barriers,
and to resist all who would speak ill of any other group.

May we not forget our responsibility to one another,
not least to the vulnerable and voiceless in our communities.
Help us to find ways of keeping in touch and offering reassurance
to those with underlying health issues;
and to any who feel particularly vulnerable.
or in danger at present.

As the virus spreads.
we pray for the disruption it causes to normal life,
bringing new fears and anxieties:
We pray for those who have been laid off as their work disappears;
for financial hardship for individuals and businesses;

for the impact on the economy and pensions, when austerity has already left its mark.

We pray for those whose trips, both for business and pleasure, have been cancelled; and others where events, long anticipated and planned for, have been postponed; for those making contingency planning for home-based work or child care or exams. May our inconvenience not blind us to others' loss.

We remember those.
who cannot visit loved ones in locked-down care homes;
for the elderly whose social contacts have been severely curtailed;
help us to find creative ways of keeping in touch,
of assuring them they are not forgotten or ignored.

May congregations find new ways of living though this time.
May we not forget our faith, but draw strength from it.
So may our worship be heartfelt,
our fellowship deepen.
and our service increase.

God of grace and God of mercy,
hear our prayers at this time.
Strengthen us, by your Spirit, so that
we may carry on our lives as best as we are able,
looking out for others,
showing love in action,
being faithful in prayer,
and bringing encouragement, hope and peace;
always trusting in you.
our Rock and our Redeemer.

These prayers we bring to you.
in Jesus' name. Amen.

5 Closing Hymn: 419 Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son.

Closing Words and Benediction:

Let us take the touch of the risen Christ
and the peace that he gives
out with us into the world.
May we bring his life-giving Spirit
to all those whom we meet this week, in person or by other means.
And the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be with you, and remain with you,
now and always. Amen.

Doxology:

(Hy. 786) May the God of peace go with us as we travel from this place;
May the love of Jesus keep us firm in hope and full of grace.