

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera

16th April 2023 – Second Sunday of Easter

John 20:19-31

SENT OUT IN FAITH AND PEACE

‘I’ll believe it when I see it!’ Are they words you have ever said before, or at least thought in your head? And if, as I’m sure is the case for many of us, you have done so some if not many times, what promises or claims cause you to have this kind of thought? Is it the promises which politicians roll out for us every election? Do we think like this when our children, or spouse, or colleague, or whoever we are with, says that they will do the dishes or clean up their mess just as soon as they have finished doing or watching something that they just can’t miss? In the face of promises or claims people make to us do we sometimes think this thought but for the sake of diplomacy keep it in our head, knowing the offense and trouble it would cause if we said it out loud? Or, do we sometimes know we should keep this thought in our head but it comes out anyway, with the expected offended reaction quickly following?

‘I’ll believe it when I see it!’ A thought we might often have, but, in reality, is it true? Is seeing always believing? Even when we are given visible proof of something our cynical brains can still leave us unbelieving, can’t they? It is said that when the first platypus skins arrived in England from Australia, people didn’t believe they were from a real animal. Those English explorers who had gone to Australia had obviously wanted to prove the existence of this very unique creature, and thought the best, and incontrovertible, way to do this would be to send physical evidence back of its existence. But, back home on the other side of the world, people believed they had been sent a hoax or a joke, and that the dead remains which had been sent to them were a combination of several different animals, perhaps a duck, beaver, and otter. The proof wasn’t proof. More in our time, there are people who deny that the moon landing occurred, or that the 9/11 attacks in the US happened, believing that the footage we have seen over and over again is not of real events, but propaganda created in a film studio. I am sure you could think of many similar examples. The reality is that none of us can see and experience everything, so we have to rely on the testimony of eyewitnesses. But sometimes, for various reasons, we find them hard to believe. So that thought comes back to us again, ‘I’ll believe it when I see it’.

In thinking about how we know what is true, especially those things which we can't see or experience firsthand for ourselves, one word we may well come up with is, 'faith'. What is faith? How do you define it? There are a whole lot of different definitions we could come up with, all of which may be right. One I will suggest is that faith is trust in something which can't be proven, or disproven. That's not exhaustive, and doesn't cover it all, but for me that gives a starting point to understanding what faith is; I believe it even though I can't see it.

And many times, when we look at the definition of something, we think about what the opposite of it is. Most of us I am pretty sure would say that the opposite of faith is ... doubt, or unbelief, or a word similar. But something I read this week in relation to today's Gospel account gave a different view. This person said that the opposite of faith is 'fear', which is what we see Thomas and the other disciples showing before they believed that Jesus really was alive. And if we think about it, that's true, isn't it? When we don't have faith that God will look after us, or our government really will protect us, or our medicines will make us well, or that because of whatever we have faith in everything will work out ok, then we do have fear.

And that takes us to today's Gospel reading. This reading has two scenes in which Jesus comes to the disciples to prove He is really alive again. In the first we are told that the disciples, without faith in the resurrection, are locked away in fear on the same evening Jesus rose again. The faith they had in Jesus, faith which had built up during the three years they had been with Him, listening to His teaching, witnessing His miracles, that faith all came crashing down to be replaced by fear when they saw how Jesus was arrested and put up to die on the cross. Jesus coming alive again? They didn't see it, so they couldn't believe it.

And then, poor Thomas wasn't with them on that night, so for the last 2,000 years he has been very publicly labelled as the 'doubter', while in reality he is no different from the other disciples. When told Jesus has risen, his response is; 'I'll believe it when I see it!' But a week later when Jesus comes to the disciples again, including Thomas this time, Thomas makes a confession of faith without applying the tests he had asked for.

What is important for us, in both of these accounts, are Jesus' words and actions to the disciples. Jesus doesn't rebuke the disciples for running away and abandoning Him just three days earlier. He doesn't say, 'Hey guys, funny thing, here we are all together again on Sunday night, but remember how just last Thursday you all abandoned me when I really needed you?' No, instead we are told that Jesus greeted them, and proved it was really Him by showing them His hands and side. In doing that He restored their faith, and gave them peace because they now knew again they could trust all the promises He had given them, and so their fear was taken away. And then Jesus sent them out saying, "I am sending you, just as the Father has sent me." Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they will be forgiven. But if you don't forgive their sins, they will not be forgiven." (v. 21a-23) The disciples were sent out in faith and peace to continue to do Jesus' work of bringing everyone to know God's love for them.

And then, after Jesus had appeared to Thomas a week later, John applies everything back to us, finishing this part off with, 'Jesus worked many other miracles for his disciples, and not all of them are written in this book. But these are written so that you will put your faith in Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God. If you have faith in him, you will have true life.' (v. 31-32) These things are written so that we will have faith in Jesus. Like many other things in our lives, we can't be firsthand witnesses to them, especially of course when those things which happened before we were alive. We hear about and believe these events and what these people did by believing what those who did see and experience them tell us. That's faith. It's so much a part of what we believe, how we act, the views and opinions we have. So many of these things come from who or what we believe. And so, it is as simple as John says it here in his Gospel; 'But these are written so that you will put your faith in Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God.' Why some believe and some don't, or some go away from their faith, or some come to faith, that's all about as much a mystery to us as how love works. We know that faith comes through the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Spirit comes to us all, so why do some accept and some reject this gift which is faith? Many people much smarter than me have tried to explain that over the years, so I can't explain it. What we can take from this, is that when we have faith we can trust and believe in the accounts we are given in the

Bible, that Jesus is who these witnesses say He is. And in believing this, we have His peace and those fears removed for us.

But there is more, here's the purpose of all this. And that comes out in how John finishes up here; 'If you have faith in him, you will have true life'. Here is the 'so what?' not just of all the Easter events, but of Jesus' whole life, indeed of the whole history of God and His people. Faith in Jesus changed the disciples' lives, just as it also now changes our lives. As we both remember and live in that, we remember that the purpose of us having faith and receiving peace isn't just so we can live in them, as important as that is, but we are also sent out to share them. On Easter Sunday we had a look at what it means for us to now look outside the tomb, to see the risen Jesus; when we believe this the world is now different, our lives are different, we are different.

As those who have now experienced what this change means in our lives, the same hands which bless us with peace, the hands which winced as the nails went through them, the hands which gave the disciples the proof Jesus really was alive, these hands now also send us out to share and to serve. We now believe because others have seen. We receive both faith and peace as a gift from God which we not only experience in our lives, because it brings us His peace and love and helps take away our fears, but we are also sent out to share them. The hands of the risen Jesus, the hands of love and sacrifice, now send us out in our lives to live and share the faith and peace we receive from Him. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- Are there any things people have told you in the past, or perhaps they still say it to you regularly, to which you cynically reply, 'I'll believe it when I see it!' ?
- Are there any aspects of our Christian faith which you find it hard to believe or understand? Or, are there things you see or experience which challenge your faith and believing? (This is ok and natural, we may all go through this at different times and in different ways)
- What does it mean to you to have God's peace in your life? How does this change how you view life, how you live, how you face and deal with what comes before you each day?
- Think about what it means to share the good news of Jesus and His peace with everyone. How do you do this already? Are there any opportunities God has placed before you which you could take up?

Pray: thank God for the love and peace He has given us in our lives. Ask God to help us to remember what this means for us and to live in it each day, and to help us to now share it in all we say and do.

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