

# North Kildonan United Church

11<sup>th</sup> April 2021 ~Rev. Don Johnson

## That First Easter Evening

Acts 4: 32-35

I John 1: 1-2:2

John 20: 19-31

*Living God, for whom no door is closed, no heart is locked, draw us beyond our doubts, till we see your Christ and touch his wounds where they bleed in others. Amen.*

*"When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, Jesus came and stood among the disciples and said, 'Peace be with you.'"*

Last Sunday we heard the Gospel account of the first Easter morning, as Mary Magdalene discovers the stone rolled away and the tomb empty. We can but guess the emotions she felt as she hurries away to find Peter and John. She tells them what she has found and the three race to the tomb. So begins the unfolding of the significance, the reality of the resurrection, first for those three and then for all who will follow after.

And it's not merely a simple act of belief to embrace the resurrection. As I said last Sunday, the gospel writer has allowed space for each of us to identify with Mary, Peter and John. One sees the grave clothes neatly folded and believes. One sees the same thing and there is no indication he believes anything. One is surprised into believing by hearing the sound of her name.

Yes, I'm sure each of us has been able to relate to these three at different times of life. Such is the joy, the challenge, the flexibility of faith. Sometimes everything makes sense and belief comes easily, assuredly, comfortably. At other times it is not so. The doubts, the contrary evidence, just seem so convincing, so strong and persuasive. And yet, and yet... Such is the dance of faith and doubt thinking Christians often find themselves engaged in.

R.S. Thomas was an Anglican minister who served congregations in Wales. His poetry is profound and challenging, with more than a touch of bleakness and painful reality. His was no easy faith readily accepted, but the faith he embraced was hard won, tested and true. In his poem "The Answer" we hear a glimmer of resurrection breaking through:

*"There have been times  
When, after long on my knees  
In a cold chancel, a stone has rolled  
From my mind, and I have looked  
In and seen the old questions lie  
Folded and in a place  
By themselves, like the piled  
Graveclothes of love's risen body."*

Our friend Thomas would have understood the sentiments of this poem. We tend to call him Doubting Thomas but perhaps that is unfair. Questioning Thomas might be a better title for him, if titles are actually necessary. And if the true be told, most of us have a strong affinity with the questioning, wondering, *"not totally convinced but tell me more"* attitude of our brother Thomas.

*"Show me"* Thomas asks of the other disciples when they tell him they have seen the Risen Christ. *"You're having me on"* is the unspoken sentiment behind his request. *"Where's the proof? Let me touch his wounds so that I can be sure that this really is Jesus,"* Thomas demands.

Thomas has to live a week with his questioning, a week of uncertainty and wondering. A week of remembering what Jesus taught both him and the rest of the disciples, remembering Jesus telling them that he would be put to death but would come back alive on the third day. A week of reflection, of believing, hoping it was true that Jesus was alive, yet rationally thinking that no one comes back from the dead, a week of faith and doubt dancing together in his mind.

A week that ended with the Risen Lord appearing to all the disciples, including Thomas. A week that ended with the invitation to touch the wounds of Jesus, and in that touch, to put aside forever Thomas's doubt. With this undeniable proof, Thomas could, would, begin an entirely new life as a faithful, believing follower of Jesus. His week of confusion was transformed into a lifetime of faithful discipleship.

And what of us, those who cannot touch the wounds of Jesus for proof, those to whom Jesus says: *"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."* We are left to wrestle with the evidence, to trust that the Gospel accounts are true, to listen to the wisdom of others and test that wisdom with our own thoughts and beliefs. And perhaps above all else, to rest confident that it is ultimately God's faith in us that truly matters, God's faith in us that saves us and God's love that embraces us.

Many years ago I picked up a very helpful book entitled Doubts Are Not Enough by the Rev. James Simpson, a Church of Scotland minister. Let me share a bit with you. He writes:

*"Unless we are going to stop seeking causes for events, we must allow that something extraordinary happened that first Easter. It is significant that the early Christians compared the resurrection to what they regarded as the two greatest acts of God in history, the creation of the world and the exodus from Egypt. The resurrection was much more than a dramatic escape from a sealed grave. It was more than the reanimation of one who had died. It was seen by the Early Church as proof of the integrity of the universe, God's seal of approval on Jesus, God vindicating the dreams for which Jesus had lived and died, God's powerful reminder that suffering and apparent failure do not have the last word in his world. The resurrection was the culminating episode in the life of one who loved as no-one ever loved, one who did God's will as no one else ever quite did it, one who was unique in character, person and work.*

He goes on to write: *"Dr. Archie Craig once told how the birds in his back garden show a sensitive awareness of the world about them. But as Dr. Craig also pointed out, they would be mistaken if they supposed that the newspapers he read were meaningless because unintelligible to them, or if they supposed that he had not in fact reversed his car out of his garage because that is a feat they are unable to perform. Being humble creatures the birds entertain no such notions, but are learning more and more to trust Dr. Craig who feeds them. Likewise, to say, as some people do, that God could not possibly have raised Jesus from the dead is to make greater claims for our present knowledge and for the human intellect than we have a right to make. Is the human mind really the measure of all things? What we deem impossible may be elementary to the God who created this infinitely complex and wonderful universe. Being humble folk, the members of the Early Church said quite simply, 'This is the Lord's doing and it is marvellous in our eyes.'"* (Doubts Are Not Enough, pages 43-44)

So this day, and every day, we live in faith, in hope of the resurrection, because, quite simply, doubts are not enough on which to build a life.

Benjamin Franklin perhaps summed up this hope best when he wrote this as his epitaph:

*"The Body of Benjamin Franklin, printer (Like the Cover of an old book  
Its contents worn out and stript of its lettering and gilding)  
Lies here, food for worms!  
But the work itself shall not be lost  
For it will, as he believed, appear once more  
In a new and more beautiful edition  
Corrected and amended  
By its Author."*

*"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."* (John 20: 30-31)

Let us end with this brief, yet profound, story.

A Roman Catholic archbishop tells of three mischievous young boys who decided to play a trick on the priest who was hearing confessions in their local church. One by one they went into the confessional and confessed all kinds of horrible sins and crimes, hoping to get a rise out of their priest. Two of them took off in a hurry; but the priest stopped the third one and, as though taking him seriously, announced that he was going to impose a penance on him. The boy was to walk up to the far end of the church, toward the figure of Jesus hanging on the cross. He was to look Jesus in the face and to say three times: *"You did all that for me, and I don't give that much"* – snapping his fingers on the "that". The young man did it once. He did it a second time. Then he found he couldn't do it a third time, but instead dissolved into tears. He left the church

a changed person. *"And the reason I know that story",* concluded the archbishop, *"is that I was that young man."*

*"My Lord and my God!"* Thomas acclaimed Jesus as he touched Christ's wounds. May that proclamation be true for you today.

Let us pray.

Glory be to you, God, our strength and our redeemer.

The vacant cross and the empty tomb

vindicate your claim that the love which suffers is the love that saves.

So fill us with joy and your Church with celebration

that the world may know that your holy Son Jesus

is not a dead hero we commemorate but the living Lord we worship,

to whom with you and the Holy Spirit be our praise for ever.

Amen.