

Coming through Locked Doors

a sermon preached on the

2nd Sunday of Easter

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at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by Fr David Moore

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Lecture: Acts 2:14a, 22-32; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31

Popular titles given to Biblical stories frequently obscure, and sometimes reverse, the stories themselves. The 'parable of the prodigal son' is a case in point – the parable is, in fact, more truly about the extravagant, boundless, and forgiving love of the Father. On this second Sunday of Easter we hear John's second resurrection story of Jesus' appearance to the fearful 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 Judeans..."¹ When this story is read and discussed it is almost always described as the story about 'doubting Thomas'.

Well, I want to suggest that this is not only a completely inadequate description of what took place on that first day, and a week later,² but that it also places the wrong character at the centre of the story – and because of that, subverts the Easter good news. John's story is not, primarily, about the limitations of Thomas – nor, indeed, about any of the somewhat disappointing disciples. Rather, this story is about the astonishing vivaciousness and life of the One who "came and stood among them and said 'Peace be with you.'"³ This is not a story about Thomas' 'doubts', any more than it is a story about the timidity, cowardice and treachery of all of the disciples. Rather, this is a story about the unbelievable and utterly unexpected forgiveness of the Victim of their treachery and cowardice. This is not a story about Thomas' need for 'proof'. Rather, this is a story about the utter disinterest in such futilities of the One who "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.'"⁴ One does not need 'proof' of being forgiven – one simply *knows* it!

The true centre of today's story is the One who comes, unbidden, unexpected, penetrating locked doors, bearing the wounds of betrayal and jealousy and small-mindedness and violence. The true centre of the story is the vivaciousness and freedom and forgiveness and abundant life and peace of the One who arises from the depths of the earth, whose very breath is Spirit and Truth and Life. If we must give today's Easter appearance story a title, then it would be more accurate, and more faithful to the gospel, to call it something like: 'the story of the One who comes from the hidden depths of the earth; who is freed from the grip of death;⁵ who penetrates our fearful defences; who is eternally wounded as a consequence of fear and greed and betrayal but who blesses with those very wounds; whose breath is life itself; whose coming is tailor-made to every person'. OK. I admit that's an impossibly-long title – it'll never take off in the media, the PR people will give it the chop. True! But that says a great deal about our penchant for superficiality and trivialisation. Resurrection faith has nothing to do with packaging up religious ideas for 'market appeal'. Rather, as the apostle wrote, resurrection faith is an imperishable inheritance, more precious than gold, which must be tested by fire and which requires various sufferings.⁶

The mysterious thing is that this vivacious, forgiving, wounded, pacific, and life-giving One, the One we call Christ, comes unbidden, and invites me to touch the very reality I would go to any lengths to avoid. When I have betrayed someone, they are the very last person I wish to meet, for to do so is to be confronted with the fact of my betrayal. So I go out of my way to avoid them. I lock the doors. The

¹ John 20:19

² John 20:26

³ John 20:19

⁴ John 20:22-23

⁵ Acts 2:24

⁶ 1 Peter 1:3-7

Christ comes, therefore, against my wishes, in spite of my attempts to bar the way, to isolate myself in my own ego-constructed world. The Christ is that reality which I desperately want to deny or avoid, but without whose uncomfortable, exposing and humbling presence I remain incomplete. Thomas is not dismissed because he does not believe the testimony of the others. Quite the opposite in fact! The wounded Christ comes to Thomas and meets him in precisely the place of Thomas' own woundedness. "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side."⁷

Thus, the resurrection symbol gestures towards this astonishing fact: that which is buried deep in us, which we attempt to keep buried by locking the doors of our souls, is actually the very means, the very source, of the life that we seek. That which must be suffered is the admission to our fearful consciousness of that which we desperately attempt to hide from. The gold is from the unexpected, unwanted, and feared place. And the Life-Giver comes to each of us in precisely that place, manner, and form which we most require. The Christ's appearance is tailor-made, as it was for Thomas, for each one of us.

Today's story is about this mysterious and astonishing good news – of the One coming through locked doors, unbidden, unsought; the One who is feared and disbelieved and who we attempt to lock out; the One whose own wounds are the means of healing and life; the One who touches us precisely, and invites us to touch the very reality which we fear; the One who breathes life into those places we thought were dead, and who charges us to do likewise.

Little wonder that, being so touched and so touching, we cannot help but join with Thomas: "My Lord, and my God!"⁸

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⁷ John 20:27

⁸ John 20:28