

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	12 April 2026
Service:	Eucharist, Second Sunday of Easter
Preacher:	The Revd Canon Vanessa Baron, Treasurer

It does not seem like a whole week ago! Easter Day was triumphant with the Easter Vigil, a baptism and confirmations; there were joyous services on Easter Sunday and a farewell to Bishop Martin. The Cathedral was spotless; the flowers beautiful; the music sublime. At home, people searched for Easter eggs; we feasted on roast lamb; families were visited and the sunny weather echoed the general jubilation. But now the busyness has slipped away, leaving us time to savour and to ponder the events we relived last week.

One week on, I wonder what we make of it all?

Taking the Gospel passage set for today, from John 20, I want to look briefly at the reaction of the disciples to the events of Easter Day and Jesus' response.

All four Gospels tell the same story, that on the first Easter Day **the disciples were amazed, confused**, bewildered and frightened. John 20:19 finds them in the evening, gathered behind locked doors 'for fear of the Jews'. And they had good cause to be frightened, for the one thing they knew for certain was that the tomb was empty, the body of Jesus had gone and that was not going to please either the Romans or the Jewish authorities. John, we're told, believed but did not understand; Mary had met Jesus in the garden and announced "I have seen the Lord!" No wonder there was confusion; then Jesus 'came and stood among them'. His opening words were 'Peace be with you' and he repeated his greeting to them a little

later. In fact, either 'Peace be with you' or 'Do not be afraid', was Jesus greeting every time he appeared to the disciples in the days before his ascension.

And we will hear those words again, in this service of Holy Communion. It is as if the risen Jesus Christ is greeting us as he did those first disciples and longing to give us his peace, in the midst of whatever confusion, anxieties or fears we might have.

Then Thomas, who, for some reason, was not with the other disciples that first Easter evening. He's often called 'doubting Thomas' but I wonder if 'honest Thomas' might be nearer the mark. In John's Gospel, at the Last Supper, Thomas is the one who tells Jesus that he does not understand. He doesn't pretend and here, when the disciples are getting excited and telling him, "We have seen the Lord!" he says simply that he can't believe until he sees for himself. A week later Jesus appears again and shows Thomas his hands and his side. He invites Thomas to touch the wound in his side.

What I find so encouraging is that Thomas is not condemned by Jesus for his doubts and lack of belief, rather he is met with compassion and mercy. In turn Thomas responds, with faith and worship, "My Lord and my God!"

Application What are we to make of this? Often I suspect, unlike Thomas, we hide our doubts and do not voice our questions. As a result, nagging doubts may persist and, I suspect, they are often the cause of people drifting away from their faith. Or they become a barrier to that 'peace' which the risen Christ wishes for us all. Questions are inevitable, especially in the face of prolonged hardship, sickness and death or when someone we love is suffering. I would like to encourage a more open and honest conversation among us. We live in an age which is suspicious of trust and that will, inevitably, have an effect on us. Ever since the Enlightenment we

have grown up believing that sceptical questioning is to be encouraged. So it is no wonder that we have questions and that we are hesitant with our questions; fearing perhaps that there will be no one to help us.

A few months ago, I discovered a book written by the church historian and theologian Alister McGrath, entitled 'Doubt in Perspective'. He makes the simple point that doubt is not the same as disbelief, rather it generally means asking questions from the standpoint of faith. Like the man in the Gospels who cries out to Jesus, "I believe. Help thou my unbelief!"

We assume, wrongly in my experience, that other Christians do not have the same questions or doubts that we have. But even people as confident as St Paul had considered the possibility that the resurrection might not be true, for he writes to the Corinthians, ch 15:17 'If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.... If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.'

In many respects our doubts are symptomatic of our human frailty and the limitations of our human nature. Alister Mcgrath uses the analogy of looking for the stars in the Milky Way. Look for them in the daytime and you cannot see them. It is not that they are not there, rather that we can only see them when it is dark.

I spent many years teaching philosophy and there are very few things that can be proved beyond all doubt. Almost all that we rely on in life is not certain in that sense, rather based on what we think are reasonable assumptions. Faith is not belief without proof but trust in a God who is worthy of such trust. It may well be that, unwittingly, we are searching for a certainty that is not possible; for a proof that is not there.

And we do well to remember that if belief in the resurrection of Christ requires faith, so does the decision not to believe in it. For

'Neither is based on absolute certainty, nor can it be'. The American author Sheldon Vanouken and his wife became friends of CS Lewis and later Sheldon Vanouken came to Christian faith himself. He wrote of the struggles he had before his conversion. 'Perhaps the leap to acceptance was a horrifying gamble - but what of the leap to rejection? ...There was only one thing to do once I had seen the gap behind me. I threw myself over the gap towards Jesus.'

On this second Sunday of Easter, the Risen Jesus Christ comes to meet us, through his Word and through the sacraments of bread and wine. He says to us, 'Peace be with you'. What the risen Lord longs for us today is the joy of the resurrection: what St Peter wrote about – 'the living hope that comes to us through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead' – to know 'the inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for us.'

But, if like Thomas, you have questions and doubts please may I encourage you to talk to one of the clergy. Thomas was not chastised by Jesus for his honesty but met with compassion and, as a result, his faith grew. 'My Lord and my God'.

May the risen Lord Jesus Christ grant us today that same faith and peace. Amen.