

# 11<sup>th</sup> April 2021 – Morning Service

## Moving from doubt to faith

Rev Alan Combes

### Call to Worship

*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! The Risen Christ is with us now, offering us the gift of peace.*

*Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. We too have seen the Lord. Let us rejoice and give thanks!*

### StF 25 – God is here

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| 1) God is here! As we his people<br>Meet to offer praise and prayer,<br>May we find in fuller measure<br>What it is in Christ we share.<br>Here, as in the world around us,<br>All our varied skills and arts<br>Wait the coming of his Spirit<br>Into open minds and hearts.     | 3) Here our children find a welcome<br>In the Shepherd's flock and fold;<br>Here as bread and wine are taken,<br>Christ sustains us, as of old;<br>Here the servants of the Servant<br>Seek in worship to explore<br>What it means in daily living<br>To believe and to adore.     |
| 2) Here are symbols to remind us<br>Of our lifelong need of grace;<br>Here are table, font, and pulpit;<br>Here the cross has central place.<br>Here in honesty of preaching,<br>Here in silence, as in speech,<br>Here, in newness and renewal,<br>God the Spirit comes to each. | 4) Lord of all, of Church and Kingdom,<br>In an age of change and doubt,<br>Keep us faithful to the gospel,<br>Help us work your purpose out.<br>Here, in this day's dedication,<br>All we have to give, receive:<br>We, who cannot live without you,<br>We adore you! We believe! |

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### Prayer of Adoration

Living God, When our Risen Lord appeared to his disciples, he greeted them in peace and breathed the Holy Spirit upon them. Breathe your Spirit upon us that we may gather to welcome Christ with glad hearts and joyful voices. Wherever we are this morning Lord may we meet with you. Open our ears to hear you speaking and our hearts to respond with joy. That we may truly see you in all your Glory - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - Creator, Saviour and Sustainer.

Saving God - we praise you; for in Christ you had a purpose and a plan. In Christ you took action on our behalf. You stepped forward when we could not. You focused all that your are - into the life, death and rising again of Jesus of Nazareth. With joy we celebrate his resurrection, by which you have shown you justice, love and mercy, and by which you have shown that you are stronger than all the powers of darkness. Through which you have freed us from the bondage of our own brokenness, bringing us safely into the care of your family; loving us until the end of time.

Lord God, we adore you – the God of sacrificial love and through our worship today, fashion us into an Easter people, to proclaim what we have seen and heard: Christ is risen. He is risen indeed! **Amen.**

### Reading: Psalm 77:1-12

I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, that he may hear me. In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord; in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying; my soul refuses to be comforted. I think of God, and I moan; I meditate, and my spirit faints. You keep my eyelids from closing; I am so troubled that I cannot speak. I consider the days of old, and remember the years of long ago. I commune with my heart in the night; I meditate and search my spirit:

'Will the Lord spurn for ever, and never again be favourable? Has his steadfast love ceased for ever? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?' And I say, 'It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed.' I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; I will remember your wonders of old. I will meditate on all your work, and muse on your mighty deeds.

### Poem – From Facing the Storm by Eddie Askew

Lord, there are moments when it seems that darkness has the upper hand.  
Light burns dim, only a flickering candle blown sideways by capricious storms.  
Clouds roll in, the sheepdog wind herding them tightly, penning them beyond the limits of my sight. Their shadows race across my meadow. The air bites chill. The picnic's over.

Sometimes the darkness welcomes me. Embraces, hides my imperfections, masks my sin, from everyone but me and you. Holds me clamped tight lest I reach out to you.

"And darkness covered the earth." Covered it twice, Lord. First, at creation, when you brought order out of chaos. Gave life and light. Then at the re-creation of the world. Signed by the cross. Darkness triumphant, or so it seemed for one brief pause. Then, in confused retreat, before the risen Lord of life and light.

Shine in my darkness, Lord. Dispel the doubt and fear that cling so close.  
Turn the weak moonlight of my faith to brighter day, in which I see your radiance and know your love.  
For your light shines in the darkness and the darkness has never put it out.

### Prayer of Confession

Lord God, you made the hearts of the disciples glad with the knowledge of the resurrection of Jesus, your Son; forgive us because, like them, we sometimes find the truth of Easter so hard to believe; forgive us that we are so easily downcast, and given to despair; forgive us that, although we claim to live by resurrection faith, we so often appear to believe that suffering is simply a tragedy and that death is the end; forgive us that we take so much convincing of the hope that you give to the world. *[Silence]*  
Thank you Lord that through your resurrection you come to us - and in the power of the risen Christ we are forgiven. Lord - comfort us and be with us in our doubt, take away our crippling fears, and through your Holy Spirit bring us to life in your service; for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

### Song – When our futures are uncertain

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| 1) When our futures are uncertain,<br>When our Christian life is tough,<br>When our worries fill our thinking,<br>When our hope is not enough –<br>Then the rallying cry of Thomas<br>Rises high above the crowd:<br>'Give your lives, your all, for Jesus.<br>Join him on this narrow road.' | 3) When I miss the great adventure,<br>When belief is too absurd -<br>Deep inside, I need, with Thomas<br>Simple faith to be assured.<br>Then, the resurrected Jesus<br>Brings to me his hands and side.<br>Overwhelming love engulfs me!<br>Death is dead and Christ's alive!           |
| 2) When the many signs confuse me -<br>Aimless wanderings fill my day -<br>Then I pray the prayer with Thomas:<br>'Gracious Lord, show us the way.'<br>Suddenly the spell is broken!<br>Truth and Life in Christ, I see:<br>'I'm the way that you are seeking,<br>Come, disciple, follow me.' | 4) Come, inspire this feeble vision,<br>Put your daring in our minds:<br>Words to motivate disciples,<br>Lives that challenge humankind.<br>Like Saint Thomas, full of passion,<br>Clear our gloom that we may see -<br>Christ, our Lord, alive forever!<br>Christ, my God, alive in me! |

## **Reading: John 20:19-31**

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."

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."

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.

## **Reading: 1 John 1:1 - 2:2**

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

## **Sermon**

Doubt is something we all go through, part of our pilgrim life journey. Doubt can come from many causes and there are no easy answers here; we cannot, and we must not preach a sermon of platitudes and false certainty. Doubt can last a moment – or sometimes a lifetime. It can come and go, or come and stay, residing in the background of our lives, resurfacing when we are at our most vulnerable. The world is a difficult place... and our lives can be good and hard in unequal measure. I am sure there are many here whose life experiences have brought them to their knees, their faith tested to the limit or even broken.

So it was with Thomas...

It's the first day of the week – in Jewish tradition – Sunday. We find the disciples gathered – hiding in a locked upper room – still devastated by Christ's brutal death and fearful for what may happen to them – the great 3 year movement of Christ's amazing ministry brought so brutally and abruptly to an end. And what happens? Jesus appears among them – bringing joy, comfort, peace and in John's account the blessing of the Holy Spirit (v23). Now poor Thomas so often gets a bad press... Thomas who had the deep misfortune, for a reason we will never know, of NOT being there when Jesus first revealed himself, living and risen, to the other disciples. And so – despite the testimony of his brothers, he doubts. Not a little but a lot! He insists he must have evidence, clear, irrefutable evidence if he is to believe again...

A week later he has his own, face to face encounter with Jesus. He sees, speaks, touches Jesus and believes... Like Thomas – we see churches and people around us struggling with doubt.

- Doubt as we see falling congregations
- Doubt as we strive to keep in touch with the youth of today...
- Doubt as we struggle to share the Good News of Jesus within the changing nature of society
- Doubt as we see whole generations who no longer attends church
- Doubt as we wonder – what will happen to us as we emerge from Covid.

It's funny, but whatever generation you grow up in there is always that temptation to look back at how much better the past was! I hear folk talk of previous ministers, at how wonderful and busy the Church was. I even find myself doing it! It is perhaps time to look forward, to move from DOUBT to FAITH Just a Thomas did. Jesus offers Thomas and us his hand. Yes, it's not always easy and No, there is no magic formula - no three point sermon on 'casting out doubt' or 'instant lifelong faith'. But perhaps there are some things we can learn from the Thomas encounter that will help us along this path.

### ***It's OK to question God***

I've always loved Thomas, because he seems to me to be the most real person in this set of events. I give thanks that we wasn't there the first time, so that we might have this incredible encounter with Jesus a week later recorded for us, for all time. Thomas is someone I can relate to. He had real questions and he shows us that it's OK to question God. There is no shame in questioning God. Jesus understands our doubt - we can be certain of that. When Thomas stood in front of him, Jesus did not reprimand him for his weakness of faith, instead Christ's first concern was for Thomas and his personal battle with doubt. Jesus took his hand, shared, showed and helped **Thomas to move from doubt TO FAITH**. Thomas was pragmatic, he wanted to see and touch. He didn't want to disengage his brain – he wanted evidence. He was uncompromising and honest. He didn't want to go 'with the flow' of the others. He could not still his doubts by pretending they didn't exist. Thomas had to be sure. God is big enough to handle our concerns, questions and doubts. We can bring them to God as Thomas brought his to Jesus – openly and without fear.

### ***In times of Doubt - Keep Going through the motions***

We note in our Bible account, that Thomas WAS there. A week later! He was still there. Despite fear and continued danger on all sides, Thomas had not disappeared back home, he had kept up his routine. It seems to me that in the midst of doubt, the biggest enemy we face is separation from God.

But if we keep going through the motions

- Keep attending
- Keep bowing our heads in prayer
- Keep meeting in fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Then we - place ourselves in a position

- to hear God
- to be touched by God
- to be comforted and upheld by God
- to be reconnected to God

Some of you may have read about the crisis of faith that struck the great Mother Teresa. In the years since her death it has emerged that she struggled with doubt for over fifty years. Around the time that she moved to Calcutta, she wrote letters talking of doubt and loneliness. She wrestled with her connection to God, feeling she had lost the sense of God's presence which she had known over previous years. Yet despite this, she continued to work amongst the poorest of the poor. Some of you have heard me say this before – but when John Wesley struggled with his faith – saying 'how can I preach faith when I have none of my own' – his friend said: John preach faith UNTIL you have it and then preach it, because you have it. So together we commit to the discipline of church life, of fellowship, prayer and worship – such that even in our doubt, we leave the door just ajar – enough for God's love to flow back into our lives.

### ***Re-finding faith can be fragile***

My final reflection involves an admission. Recently some friends kindly bought us a hanging basket. It looked beautiful and with the cold weather we kept it inside, safe, warm and watered. Now I'm not a great gardener and last week, warmer weather came and I even saw my neighbour planting a beautiful array of small, colourful bedding plants out on his front lawn. Great, I thought, now is the time, and I placed our delicate emerging hanging basket outside. Only to find that the recent cold snap killed half of them!

When we experience difficult times, when we go through doubt. As we emerge little by little on the other side – our fledging re-born faith can be fragile. Easily knocked back. I notice that the one word that Jesus repeated more than any other in these moments described by John is 'peace.' Specifically - 'My peace, be with you'. A common greeting but now invested with much richer, deeper meaning. A greeting which at its root speaks of reconciliation and safety. Jesus is saying – I am here, I am with you, and through me you are safe.

### ***BE Encouraged***

Sometimes our doubt persuades us that our cause is no longer valid. Our doubt convinces us that even though we believe, no one around us is interested. That what we have to say isn't relevant to them.

My friends – when I doubt – I cling to what I know:

*I know Christ is risen* because of the witness of St Peter and St Paul, who in the face of persecution and death created the Church that 2000 years later gathers millions of people across the globe.

*I know Christ is risen* because of St Fabiola; a noble Roman woman in the middle ages who, because of her faith, gave up all earthly pleasures and devoted herself to charitable work.

*I know Christ is risen* because of Martin Luther King, John Wesley and Catherine Booth who fought committed, life long, whole hearted battles for human rights, equality the plight of the poor and social justice.

*I know Jesus is risen* because of Olaudah Equiano, Willberforce and Thomas Clarkson who, amongst many, fought the abolition of the slave trade. And because of Don and Deyon Stephens whose Mercy medical ships have offered medical treatment to over half a million people since 1978.

*I know Christ is risen* because of countless more who responded to the living Lord Jesus by seeing the world as God sees and by deep life changing commitment to God's work in the world.

*I know Christ is risen* because of Rev Peter Knight, Margaret Williams, David Core, Don Barnard, Harry Richardson, Eric Thompson, Alan & Beryl Roberts, Reg and Norma Guest - to name but a few of the ordinary local, faithful people from our churches here in the Vale of Stour:

- Whose faith in the risen Christ shone out through their lives and their actions
- Their sacrificial love extending to those in need whatever their creed or colour
- Their commitment to God reaching their neighbour and the world
- Who have now gone to 'be at peace' with God, by grace, through faith

When the women came and found the empty tomb. The angels said: why do you look for the living amongst the dead? My friends – It's time to look forward - to move from DOUBT to FAITH. Christ is risen. We may never fully understand this but it is true! I do not stand here trying to prove the theory of it. I am not even called to persuade people of it. I am simply called to declare it is true and to live the consequences of faith in Christ in my life. **Amen**

### **StF 673 – Will you come and follow me**

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| <p>1) Will you come and follow Me if I but<br/>call your name?<br/>Will you go where you don't know and never<br/>be the same?<br/>Will you let My love be shown?<br/>Will you let My name be known,<br/>Will you let My life be grown in you and<br/>you in Me?</p> <p>2) Will you leave yourself behind if I but<br/>call your name?<br/>Will you care for cruel and kind and never<br/>be the same?<br/>Will you risk the hostile stare<br/>Should your life attract or scare?<br/>Will you let Me answer prayer in you and<br/>you in Me?</p> <p>3) Will you let the blinded see if I but call<br/>your name?<br/>Will you set the prisoners free and never<br/>be the same?<br/>Will you kiss the leper clean<br/>And do such as this unseen,<br/>And admit to what I mean in you and you in Me?</p> | <p>4) Will you love the 'you' you hide if I but<br/>call your name?<br/>Will you quell the fear inside and never<br/>be the same?<br/>Will you use the faith you've found<br/>To reshape the world around,<br/>Through My sight and touch and sound in<br/>you and you in Me?</p> <p>5) Lord, Your summons echoes true when You<br/>but call my name,<br/>Let me turn and follow You and never<br/>be the same.<br/>In Your company I'll go<br/>Where Your love and footsteps show<br/>Thus I'll move and live and grow in You and<br/>You in me.</p> |
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*John L Bell & Graham Maule*

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### **Prayers of Intercession**

Lord Jesus Christ, in this world where hopes are so often dashed and dreams so often broken, we remember today the faith in the future you bring to so many, through your coming, your teaching, healing and living ministry and through your resurrection from the dead. We pray for this - your precious world - particularly the environment and brave decisions that must be made.

L: Lord Jesus, where faith dies and dreams fade      **R: May hope grow again**

We remember how Mary and Joseph looked forward to the day of your birth, how shepherds and magi caught their breath in wonder as they knelt before you, how the hearts of Anna and Simeon leapt in anticipation, and how your disciples and the crowds that flocked to hear you gave thanks, convinced that you were the Messiah, the one God had promised, the long-awaited deliverer come to set them free. We pray for the poor, the oppressed, those denied justice and who suffer corrupt governments and those who look to us for deliverance.

L: Lord Jesus, where faith dies and dreams fade      **R: May hope grow again**

We remember how the early disciples had a vision of the future that was shattered and crushed by the events of Holy Week. Your pain, humiliation, suffering and death – hope ebbing away as the lifeblood seeped from your body – an end to their dreams, an end to everything. We pray for a world struck down with Covid, lives lost and dreams crushed, we remember all those who are afflicted, sick in body or spirit, tired, stressed or lonely... today we pray especially for those who may doubt, and feel strength and faith ebbing away.

L: Lord Jesus, where faith dies and dreams fade      **R: May hope grow again**

We remember how the news spread that the tomb was empty, the stone rolled away, your body gone, and how despite it all, your followers could scarcely bring themselves to hope – afraid to take the risk of faith in case they should face the heartache of losing you once more. And we remember finally how you appeared, in all your risen glory – in the garden, in the upstairs room, on the Emmaus road, by the Sea of Galilee – and the dream was born again, the smouldering embers of faith rekindled. Lord – we pray for your Church - born then and re-born today in your resurrection light.

L: Lord Jesus, where faith dies and dreams fade      **R: May hope grow again**

Lord Jesus Christ, a world is waiting, hurting, longing, searching for hope, crying out for meaning, hungry for some reason to believe in the future. Come again in your living power, and bring new life to all.

L: Lord Jesus, where faith dies and dreams fade      **R: May hope grow again**

### **The Lord's Prayer**

Our Father, who 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 trespasses,  
as we forgive those who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation;  
but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the  
glory for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name, your kingdom come,  
your will be done, on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial  
and deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are  
yours now and for ever. **Amen.**

### **The Peace**

Whenever we're afraid and hiding out, all locked up, God comes to us in the midst of our fear and says, 'Peace be with you.'  
Whatever doubts churn in our minds,  
whatever sins trouble our consciences,  
whatever pain and worry bind us up,  
whatever walls we have put up or doors we have locked securely,  
God comes through them to us and says, 'Peace be with you.'

## StF 626 – Even though I walk

1) Even though I walk through the valley  
Of the shadow of death,  
Your perfect love is casting out fear.  
And even when I'm caught in the middle  
Of the storm of this life,  
I won't turn back; I know you are near.  
And I will fear no evil, for my God is with me.  
And if my God is with me,  
Whom then shall I fear?  
Whom then shall I fear?

Ch) *Oh no, you never let go,  
Through the calm and through the storm.  
Oh no, you never let go,  
In every high and every low.  
Oh no, you never let go,  
Lord, you never let go of me.*

2) And I can see a light that is coming  
For the heart that holds on,  
A glorious light beyond all compare.  
And there will be an end to these troubles,  
But until that day comes,  
We'll live to know you here on the earth  
And I will fear no evil, for my God is with me.  
And if my God is with me,  
Whom then shall I fear?  
Whom then shall I fear?

Br) Yes, I can see a light that is coming  
For the heart that holds on,  
And there will be an end to these troubles,  
But until that day comes,  
Still I will praise you, still I will praise you.

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## Blessing

Jesus spoke to Thomas: Put your hand here, and see the place of the nails. Doubt no longer, but believe,  
Alleluia - Go in God's grace - to work in God's Service, to God's Glory

**Amen**