

**Sunday 19 April 2020 - online worship from Knox Church, Dunedin, New Zealand
preached by Jordan Redding - for Easter 2**

It can be accessed from the Knox Church YouTube Channel

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCYksSjG0If00NeogNIGs7A>.

or from the Knox Church website – <https://knoxchurch.net/>

“Peace be with you!” a sermon based on John chapter 20



I.

I wonder what you notice about the mosaic. You can probably tell the scene it is depicting. It is our gospel reading for today when Jesus appears to his disciples in the locked room and invites Thomas to see and touch his wounds and know that he really is risen. You can see the other disciples gathered round in the locked room with the dim lighting, the candles, the empty dining chair inviting the viewer in to participate.

A peculiarity I noticed is that everything is slightly distorted. There's no one perspective. Most paintings or mosaics have one or two perspectives so that things appear in proportion. But here, it's almost like the disciples are standing on different levels, floating in space around Jesus. On the one hand, we peer into a confined and narrow space, a locked room. On the other hand, there is a spaciousness and liveliness to the scene.

I wonder if the artists are trying to tell us something of what resurrection reality is like. This is a reality that is similar, one we're invited to participate in through the empty chair. And yet it's dissimilar. It's unlike anything we know, completely new,

and outside our experience. The colour and light also helps to convey meaning. Jesus is clearly the central focus. The light almost emits from his body. And he's dressed in vivid, fiery red robes, intermingled with a cool, light, soothing blue. The underside of his robe, around his wound, appears to flow out from his wound like a gushing spring of water. The fiery red, I think, is a symbol of the Holy Spirit, breathed on the disciples by Jesus. The cool blue is perhaps a symbol of abundant peace: the peace that is won through the cross of Christ, poured out for all. Peace and Holy Spirit: these are the definitive signs of Christ's resurrected life.

But the red and the blue aren't contained within Christ's person. It's almost as if the light and colour is spilling out from him, leaking, seeping into the disciples around him and into the world. It's as if the artists are suggesting this resurrection reality is contagious. It can't be contained by Christ's material body but all who come into contact with the risen Jesus are vivified, energised, agitated. Their whole world is distorted. The perspectives by which we make sense of the world are shaken up. This resurrection reality is not just something that happened to Jesus but something that we all participate in as we encounter the risen Christ and receive his Holy Spirit.

II.

And then there's Thomas. I couldn't figure out why the artists gave him light blue hair... perhaps to convey that moment of conversion, of realisation. I noticed his eye as well. It's out of proportion with the rest of his body and with the eyes of everyone else in the scene. Thomas is the one who demands to see in order to believe. He demands proof that Jesus is risen. But I wonder if the artists are going further. For Thomas, his demand to see is a hindrance to believing. Seeing too much can in fact blind us. Like when we look at the sun. Our eyes take in too much light and we become blind. Perhaps with his oversized eye, the artists are suggesting that Thomas saw too much. He was so overwhelmed by recent events, by the fear of death, by the persecution against Jesus' followers, by the imminent reality in front of him that he couldn't see anything else. He was unable to believe from testimony alone that Christ is risen. He reaches out but he cannot see.

Look at Thomas' halo. All the other disciples have a halo as well. It is a symbol of holiness and of solidarity with the risen Christ who is one with them by the Spirit. Unlike the others, Thomas' halo is starting to disintegrate, to fall apart, right in front of his eyes, in his field of vision. And his hand doesn't actually touch the wounds of Christ like it does in other artistic depictions of this scene. Instead, his hand hovers in a black abyss: Thomas can see and yet is blind, unable to truly believe. He is thrown into despair, locked into the fear of death.

I think Thomas actually gets a bit of a hard time. And eventually of course he does believe. Christ does not abandon him to his disbelief and despair. Thomas is much the same as the other disciples except that they were lucky enough to be present in the room when Christ appeared in the room the first time. But were they just as overwhelmed by their circumstances as Thomas? Like us, they were in lockdown, in self-isolation. They had locked themselves away, not because of a virus but, we're told, for fear of the Jews (which in John's Gospel is a blanket term for the group out to kill Jesus and by extension his followers). It's quite rational that the disciples should want to lock themselves away from such a real threat. And yet, as we are discovering, a physical lockdown is never just a physical lockdown. It affects our whole being, our daily rhythms, our mood and emotions, our social wellbeing (as we can't be physically present with others as we used to), our spiritual wellbeing... It affects our wellbeing at every level. It's similar, I think, with the disciples. Yes, they have locked themselves away physically, but they have done so out of fear and this fear is crippling them, holding them captive, locking them in until it's their whole reality and all they can see ... until Christ breaks into their lockdown and declares peace and banishes their fear from them.

III.

Their locked room is not just a room. It is a tomb. A self-made tomb. John wants us to see it this way, I think. That's because it mirrors Jesus' resurrection. You may have noticed that our reading today takes place (at least the first part, without Thomas) on Easter day, the day of Jesus' resurrection. But unlike Jesus' resurrection that happens at the beginning of the day, this happens at the end of the day. The beginning of the day we know well. We heard it last week: the rising dawn of new creation, the empty tomb, the astonished disciples, the weeping Mary, Jesus breaking out of his tomb and appearing to her in the garden.

But don't forget that our reading today also happens on Easter Sunday. For John the day of resurrection begins with Jesus breaking out of his tomb and it ends with Jesus breaking into the self-made tomb of the disciples. It begins with the empty grave and ends with Jesus declaring peace and breathing the Holy Spirit on the disciples. I wonder if John is suggesting that resurrection isn't just something miraculous that happened to Jesus 2000 years ago. Rather it is an ongoing reality that begins with Jesus rising and the empty grave, but continues even now as the risen Christ breaks into our self-made tombs by the Spirit. The risen Jesus is busy liberating creation from the bondage of fear and death and giving us the Holy Spirit that we may share in his work of peace-making, reconciliation and forgiveness. In other words, resurrection continues even now and will continue until the end of all things when

heaven and earth will be made new: the new creation of all, the renewal of all things in Jesus Christ.

It's significant for us that Jesus appears to his disciples in self-isolation and lockdown. In other words, we should expect that we will be disrupted in lockdown. Expect Jesus to break in. Before Easter, we played around with the idea that self-isolation can be like a tomb: we looked at the raising of Lazarus in John 11 and then on Good Friday we dwelt on Jesus' own death and burial in a tomb. But now, after Easter, I wonder if John is inviting us to imagine our self-isolation less as a tomb and more as a womb, as a place of new birth, of new creation; the place in which we receive the peace of death-defeated and receive the Holy Spirit that we may be continually born again and share in the resurrection reality.

Could our self-isolation -- as hard as it has been and as difficult as it will continue to be in the subsequent months as we jump between levels 2, 3, and 4 -- be a time of rebirth, of recreation, of renewal as we receive anew the peace of Christ and are called to share in the work of peacemaking? May we join with Christ in bursting from the tomb in anticipation of the day when all heaven and earth will be made new and all will dwell in the presence of God.

Peace be with you!

KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN

***Captivated by the vision of the realm of God,
made known in Jesus, given in grace***



Knox Church
449 George Street
Dunedin
New Zealand
www.knoxchurch.net

Kerry Enright: 027 467 5542, minister@knoxchurch.net

