

## **Sermon for Sunday 12 April 2026 – The Second Sunday of Easter**

**Revd Canon Simon Pitcher, Rector**

***Acts 2.14a,22-32; Psalm 16; 1 Peter 1.3-9; John 20.19-31***

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Please do be seated.

I've always been intrigued at Easter by St John's reference to Thomas needing to touch Jesus. It's an important part of St John's giving us evidence that Jesus is risen and alive.

And I wondered, it occurred to me, I wondered if Thomas touching Jesus was about providing evidence that all five of our senses are involved in St John's account, because we have five senses, don't we? We can see, hear, taste, smell, and touch. And using all of our senses are what it means to be fully alive. So if all of our senses were engaged in John's account of the resurrection, is that part of his providing evidence that Jesus is fully alive? So that was the thought process that I began in preparing this sermon.

And the other thing that developed as I was preparing this sermon was the way that chapter 20 of the Gospel references and kind of acts out a lot of the words and verses of many of the Psalms. So both in using our senses and in the praise and worship of the Old Testament in the Psalms, John seems to be giving us evidence that Jesus is really alive, he is risen. So how does that play out?

When it was evening of the same day, St John tells us that Jesus comes to his house, comes to the house where the disciples were meeting, and they're locked in because they are afraid. And they're afraid that they're going to be arrested. It's dark in the room, they're fearful, and this particular psalm kind of sums up how they were feeling. Psalm 18: 'In my distress I called to the Lord, I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry came before him into his ears.' I thought that kind of summed up the mood of the disciples as they sit in that room, fearful that Jesus is dead, that it was all a waste of time, that they were lost, that God has abandoned them. But no, he hasn't.

So Jesus comes to them and says, 'Peace be with you,' and he shows them his hands and his side, and the disciples see and they hear him. Psalm 46.10, the psalmist says, 'Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, and I will be exalted in the earth.' That's very much what Jesus is now saying to his disciples when he says, 'Peace be with you.' 'Be still and know that I am God.' So seeing and hearing, two senses engaged.

And then Jesus says this strange sentence that I remember talking about in a high school one time, and the children were very disturbed by the idea of being breathed upon. They didn't like that at all. But it says Jesus breathed upon them and they received the Holy Spirit. You might think I'm a bit far-fetched on this one, but in terms of our senses, breathing, breathing out involves the mouth, breathing out, which is about tasting, isn't it? And the disciples breathe in through their nose, don't they, which is about smelling. You might think that's a bit far-fetched, but to me that was two more of the senses engaged.

But more importantly, a couple of weeks ago we heard the story of the Valley of the Dead Bones, the dry bones, in the book of Ezekiel. And the breath of God enlivens these bones. They get flesh and sinews and they stand up, and when the breath of God comes upon them, they begin to live. Also, having Genesis, we have the story of one of the accounts of creation that God moulds Adam out of clay and breathes on him. And by being breathed upon, Adam is given his life.

So Jesus now comes to his disciples who are fearful, lifeless, in the dark, and he breathes upon them and gives them life. And Psalm 150.6 says, 'Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.' And Psalm 34.8 says, 'Taste and see that the Lord is good, and blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.' So the disciples who were fearful and lifeless have now been breathed upon. They've seen and heard and tasted and smelt the living Jesus. And so, 'Taste and see that the Lord is good. Blessed are those who take refuge in him.'

Well, St John tells us that the body of Jesus, when Jesus's body was taken down from the cross, was wrapped in burial clothes with spices for burial. And the spices that John tells us were myrrh and aloes, weighing about 100 pounds, he says. Strong-smelling spices to ward off the smell of death. Psalm 45 celebrates the arrival of a new king and says, 'Your robes are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes. From ivory palaces, stringed instruments make you glad.' So in other words, the same smell that in the Old Testament, in the Psalms, welcomes a new king with praise and delight and joy is the same smell that Jesus was buried with. And perhaps it was the same smell that the disciples encountered when the risen Jesus comes into that dark, locked upper room. So the sense of smell and taste, the smell of myrrh and aloes. So the disciples have seen, heard, tasted, and smelt the presence of the risen Jesus. As he appears to them, but they haven't touched him.

So along comes Thomas, and he says, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark in his side, I will not believe.' And a week later, of course, Jesus appears and commands Thomas, 'Put out your finger and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side.' So Thomas is invited to touch, and that completes all the resurrection appearances of Jesus in chapter 20 of John's Gospel. And in those appearances, we have all of human sense

engaged: sight, hearing, touching, smelling, and tasting. Thus, I suggest, John is proving to us that Jesus is fully alive, because we're fully alive when all of our senses are engaged.

Some scholars think that that's where St John's Gospel should finish and that chapter 21, if we were to read on, is a later addition. If in case you're not convinced by my suggesting to you that taste and smell were engaged in what I've just described, in chapter 21 the disciples go to Galilee and they find Jesus cooking fish on a beach and he puts the fish in a bread roll and gives it to them to eat. So clearly smell and taste are important in that encounter. So all of the senses are engaged in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and therefore I suggest to you that St John proves to us that Jesus was fully risen, fully alive.

So how does that help us? If the risen Jesus is encountered by his disciples through all of their senses, evidence that convinces them that he is fully alive. Can we too also know Jesus through all of our senses? Well, in one understanding, no, because of course Jesus says to Thomas, 'Have you believed because you've seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen me and yet have come to believe.' But we can see, can't we? We can see the difference that faith in the risen Jesus it makes to people.

We had a wedding here on Thursday, and the church was packed with very lively young people. And there were some bridesmaids in the front row here and the bride's family behind, and the Salvation Army band was at the back making a wonderful noise. And as I watched the young people here singing the hymns and praising God, you could see in their faces that they believed. As well as hearing their beautiful singing and the music, you could see what their faith meant to them, and that was quite convincing. So we can watch how faith makes a difference in people's lives, and we can see it.

And we can see, can't we, what difference the church makes in the world, what church leaders might say about some of the key issues in the world. St Paul wrote to the Corinthians, and he said, 'Let light shine out of darkness. May the light of Christ shine in your faces.' — I'm paraphrasing — to the glory of God, so that, you know, if our hearts are filled with faith and love of Christ Jesus, others will see it in our faces. And if our church is filled with the love of Christ, people will recognise that he is here because they will see it.

In our worship, we hear the word of God and we sing his praises. And St Paul is very aware that the tongue by which we speak and by which we taste can be used for good or for ill. People can hear prayers, hear what is said, engage through hearing, taste also on the tongue. Writing to the Ephesians, St Paul says, do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths. But only

what's helpful in building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. He also commends the use of tongues in worship to build up the church and enliven the church.

And in respect of taste, later on in this service we will receive bread and wine in the Eucharist, which are an important reminder to us, part of our spiritual life, reassuring us of the presence of the risen Jesus within us. So I think that covers the senses. I don't think I've missed any out, have I? So I was particularly drawn to that line of thought about experiencing Christ with all of our senses by Thomas's insistence on touch.

Now we know sadly that touch can be misused, but used correctly, touch is life-giving and affirming. I remember somebody once said to me one time, 'No one has touched me for a whole month, but when touched, it's a moment when I realise that I'm still alive.' Being touched can be a moment of affirmation, can't it? It can be a moment of belonging, of acknowledgement by somebody that you matter to them. Blessing and friendship and healing and love can all be expressed in the gift of touch.

And in our worship, we are invited to touch each other when we share the peace. Now, in COVID times, obviously we backed off from that because it was regarded as a risk, and sharing the peace is still naturally to us very un-British. But exchanging the peace is about the Hebrew word Shalom, And Shalom means peace, but it doesn't just mean, you know, peace. It means something much more deep than that. When we say 'Peace be with you' to somebody, it means that you're wishing for somebody complete well-being — physical, psychological, social, spiritual. It means putting yourself right with somebody else, putting yourself right with God. Sharing the peace with somebody can be an expression of forgiveness, and it therefore is also an expression of trust and respect and friendship and love.

And sharing the peace therefore defines the character of the church through the gift of touch. Shalom, peace. And it's a gift of the Holy Spirit by which the Holy Spirit can transform us, taking away any sense of self-loathing or fear or doubt or failure. It's about the unconditional acceptance and inclusion and grace that Christ Jesus offers to us when we express and share the peace with each other. Which is why when Jesus comes to his disciples in that locked upper room, they all feel a sense of failure, they all are rather angry with each other, they all doubt God, and Jesus says to them, 'Peace be with you.'

Now, I acknowledge that some of us don't want to be touched, some of us don't like being touched, and therefore a smile and a kind word can have the same effect. There's no compulsion when it comes to sharing the peace, but it's just about my thoughts that Thomas needing to touch Jesus is clearly an important part of the resurrection story of Jesus and of our faith. So touch, therefore,

is also important in expressing our own relationship with God and with each other in appropriate ways.

So all of our senses are therefore to be engaged. Christ is risen, this we celebrate, fully alive and fully three-dimensional. In Jesus' name. Amen.