



**Seacliff Uniting Church**  
**Online Worship & Electronic Resources**  
**Number 5**                      **April 19th 2020**

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## **Celebration of Worship**

Welcome to worship and reflection for the 19<sup>th</sup> of April, 2020.

A brief introduction to these notes:

These written notes are complementary to but not exactly the same as the content of the video worship. There is material in these notes that does not appear in the video.

On the other hand, these notes come in several short sections [and one longer one] so that you can select which part(s) you want to read at any one time – including the order you read them. And as has been the custom thus far, there are some questions for further reflection at the end of the notes.

### **Call to worship**

The life-giving power of God reaches us through doors bolted by fear and doubt. It reaches us through wounds and scars. Prepare now to hear words of peace and healing; let God fill our hearts with joy this day.

A favourite hymn of mine is #262 in the TiS book.

It begins with a cry of anguish all too common in people who suffer deep loss, and takes us on a journey of hope alongside uncertainty, as we, as it says, "take our chance with God".

## **TiS 262 When pain and terror strike**

**Brian Wren**

When pain and terror strike by chance,  
with causes unexplained,  
when God seems absent or asleep,  
and evil unrestrained,  
we crave an all-controlling force  
ready to rule and warn,  
but find, far-shadowed by a cross,  
a child in weakness born.

We marvel at God's nakedness  
and sense the play of chance  
in Herod's anger, Peter's growth,  
and Pilate's troubled glance.  
Our Saviour's tempted, tested way  
never was cut and dried,  
but costly, risking life and love,  
betrayed and crucified.

How deep the Wisdom of our God,  
how weak, but truly wise,  
to risk, to sacrifice, to die,  
and from the grave arise,  
to shred the shroud of death and fate,  
freeing our hearts for good.  
We breathe the ample air of hope  
and take our chance with God.

Since Wisdom took its chance on earth,  
to show God's living way,  
we'll trust that fear and force will fail,  
and Wisdom win the day.  
Then come, dear Christ, and hold us fast  
when faith and hope are torn,  
and bring us, in your loving arms,  
to resurrection morn.

## Prayer

The first prayer is derived from prayers for the last two Lenten Studies in the book by Robert Bos; the second is from a book "Prayers for all seasons".

God of ever-new possibilities, we thank you that suffering, hardship, even death, never have the last word with you.

***Risen, victorious Jesus, you obediently followed the way you were called, at great cost.***

Out of the dark times, you God bring about new beginnings.

***You suffered the worst that people could do to you, Jesus, but you are the Lord of life, and life wins.***

With you there is always hope, to overcome any fear.

***You are with us always, you are with us now.***

Your light penetrates the darkest places, even a sealed-up guarded tomb.

***You call us to be a people of light and life and love.***

God of new life, as we continue to reflect on the happenings of Easter, renew our joy and trust in you; encourage our faith, so that although we do not see you, yet we are able to believe and rejoice in you.

*For our prayers of confession, you are invited to begin each part with your fists clenched, and as the words "Help us to let go now" are said, open your fist, and respond with "We receive your Holy Spirit".*

Everything we hold on to, that holds us or controls us,

***and makes us doubt your presence:  
help us to let go now.***

We receive your Holy Spirit.

The memories of hurt that speak loudly to us, that dull us, that we cannot forgive, that paralyse us

***and make us doubt your presence:  
help us to let go now.***

We receive your Holy Spirit.

The words that linger in our conscience, words that haunt us, that we wish we had never said

***and make us doubt your presence:  
help us to let go now.***

We receive your Holy Spirit.

In every doubt, God says, "Here are my wounds: touch them."

In our greatest hurt, God calls us.

In our most shame-filled confession, God says, "I am listening."

For God is full of grace, and invites us to hear the words:

Your sin is forgiven

**Thanks be to God.**

## **A shorter reflection**

There is a reading in the lectionary this week from the Book of Acts: chapter 2:22-32.

It's an account of Peter's address to the assembled crowd who had gathered on the day of Pentecost, attracted by the strange events of that day.

Peter addressed the crowd with a simple message: concerning Jesus, he said, "You did ... but God did ... ."

"You killed Jesus but God raised him."

Something that mere people did to Jesus was not going to be enough to stop God when it came to creating new life.

You may recall that Matthew's account of the burial of Jesus includes the story of the posting of the guard, to ensure that nobody came along during the night and stole Jesus' body – so that they could later claim that he had been raised. Posting the guard didn't work either – when the women turned up the next morning, the tomb was still sealed shut: it was opened up while they watched – and found to be already empty!! The transformation from the dead physical body to the living resurrected body had taken place *while the tomb was still closed*.

It was going to take more than human action to stop the business of resurrection.

But that hasn't stopped people trying ever since. That's because, as Gary said last week, resurrection is to be experienced, not debated, or argued over.

An assortment of authorities, starting with those who ordered the guard to be posted, have tried to keep Jesus locked away or at a safe distance. They've done this because they know that resurrection experienced is a dangerous thing, to be feared by authorities everywhere.

So they employ church systems, to manage the resurrection.

They employ a sacred text, to be read literally and obeyed absolutely, to control the flow of ideas.

They employ specified mandatory beliefs, to keep believers compliant.

They employ a mandated morality, to achieve social control.

In short, anything that keeps the sheer power and life of resurrection locked up, or at least tamed, anything that enables one group of people to control another – it's so much safer that way.

But God will not be stopped. Resurrection will prevail.

*There are further questions at the end, but for now just one: what is your immediate "gut reaction" to this reflection?*

## **The Gospel: John 20:19-31**

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week (the day of the resurrection), 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."

## **A longer reflection**

A little over 30 years ago I found myself one Sunday morning sitting in church listening to a sermon about myself. I should add that nobody else knew it was about me, certainly not the preacher – he thought he was preaching about a disciple named Thomas.

But I knew it was about me.

Poor old Thomas – subjected to just about the most sustained bad press in human history. And for what? Because on one occasion he dared to speak the truth. He didn't pretend. He simply said what he felt.

It was always so. Three times Thomas appears in the Gospel of John, and we can say one thing for sure about him: he is a consistent, reliable character – he's always confused. This Jesus to whom he has committed his life is so unpredictable, so incomprehensible; Thomas's head can't keep up.

**The first time** we meet him is when Jesus is planning to visit his friends Martha and Mary, and Lazarus, in Bethany. The disciples are aghast – you can't do that! They're out to get you! And it was true – to go to Bethany, on the outskirts of Jerusalem, was not a wise course of action. But one of them says, "Well, if that's what he wants, we'd better go with him. We can't just let him go off to die alone." That was Thomas, of course. Quite confused, utterly loyal.

**The second time** we meet Thomas is the night before Jesus died, at dinner with his friends. Jesus is talking about taking them to be with him, on a path they all know.

And Thomas says, "But we don't know the way? How can we?" To which Jesus replies, "You're looking at him. I am the way." I'm not sure just how helpful Thomas found that. We Christians have turned it into a theological statement, a test of orthodox belief, of who's "IN" and who we can exclude. But I reckon it may have left Thomas just shaking his head – what on earth does he mean?

**Then the third time** is in the Gospel reading we just heard. As the story is written, it's a week after resurrection day. The disciples had met Jesus that first day, in the evening, while they were all hiding away. But Thomas was absent, out and about – apparently not in hiding, not afraid, or at least not letting fear stop him from living. During the week they all catch up – and they tell Thomas the fabulous news – Jesus is alive!! But it's beyond his comprehension.

How could it be otherwise? I mean, I remember the day I was told that Darwin had been flattened by Cyclone Tracey – I didn't believe it. It was too impossible, too ridiculous, to be true. So of course Thomas could not get his head around it.

Not likely, he says. Where's the evidence?

In our reading, Thomas is confronted with his evidence. And there's been this rush to judgement of Thomas ever since. Why do we pick on Thomas? The other 11 have believed because they had the proof; Thomas is deprived of the proof but is criticised for not believing. How does that work? Because it helps the rest of us evade the real point of the story, which is what comes next: "Ah Thomas; now you see me, you believe. But how much better would it have been, eh, if you could have just believed the story you were told, without needing to have the proof?"

And suddenly we realise that we are Thomas. And Jesus' wistful words to Thomas are directed squarely at us.

The writer of the Gospel of John wrote this story for the people of his community who, 70 or so years after Jesus and in far-away Ephesus, had not met Jesus in person, could never do, yet were being asked to put their life in his hands. Just like Thomas. A massive split had torn the community apart, people were asking, "Why Jesus? Why not the other lot?" Where's the evidence?

The writer says, "I can only tell you what I know. You have to work out your own response."

Thomas found it a step too far. And we are always in that place – he got his proof but we never will. So what about us? How do we respond to the promise of life in Jesus, the invitation to trust him with our lives?

Thomas is all of us.

## **TiS 649**

### **These things did Thomas count as real**

**Thomas Henry Troeger**

1 These things did Thomas count as real:  
the warmth of blood, the chill of steel,  
the grain of wood, the heft of stone,  
the last frail twitch of flesh and bone.

2  
The vision of his sceptic mind  
was keen enough to make him blind  
to any unexpected act  
too large for his small world of fact.

3  
His reasoned certainties denied  
that one could live when one had died,  
until his fingers read like Braille  
the markings of the spear and nail.

4  
May we, O God, by grace believe  
and thus the risen Christ receive,  
whose raw, imprinted palms reached out  
and beckoned Thomas from his doubt.

## **Prayers for the world**

In these different and uncertain times, there are many people we remember and pray for today:

The church, locally and worldwide, remembering too the performing arts and sports communities for whom large-scale audiences provide their financial security – help us to see the new life and new way of being that you are calling us to.

Those enduring hardship or trauma as a result of the current health crisis – those who have lost their jobs, people who have seen a business collapse, 20 years of work, even a life's work, wiped out.

The people in quarantine, those who have contracted the disease and are seriously ill with it

The front-line people serving us and caring for those in need – medical and nursing staff [how many cases of PTSD do we think will arise over the weeks ahead?]

Medical researchers, ambulance crews, police and others who must enforce the laws around the restrictions we live with

Political leaders trying to balance the conflicting demands of public health, national and personal financial loss, and public impatience with lifestyle restrictions.

Our gracious God, let your Spirit rest on all these for whom we pray: your Spirit of Wisdom, of Counsel, of Compassion, of Discernment, of Grace, of Patience, of Endurance.

### ***The community prayer of the church***

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,  
and 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

**TiS 691      Faith will not grow from words alone**

Elizabeth J Smith

1

Faith will not grow from words alone,  
from proofs provided, scripture known;  
our faith must feel its way about,  
and live with question-marks and doubt.

2

The pattern Jesus showed, we share:  
life comes through death, hope through despair.  
God is made known in brokenness,  
and faith feeds on God's emptiness.

3

The church still tells how Jesus came  
through death to glorious life again –  
the strangest story! Yet, maybe,  
our faith will thrive on mystery.

4

Faith takes the little that we know,  
and calls for hope and tells us: Go!  
Love and take courage, come what may;  
Christ will be with us all the way.

There's an Easter Affirmation printed in the latest edition of *New Times*:  
Hope is stronger than memory.  
Salvation is stronger than sin.  
Forgiveness is stronger than bitterness.  
Resurrection is stronger than crucifixion.  
Light is stronger than darkness.  
The empty tomb is stronger than the bloodied cross.  
The Risen Lord is stronger than the dead Jesus.  
Easter is stronger than Good Friday.

We are an Easter people.  
We are a people of hope.  
We are a people of the empty tomb., the risen Lord, the new life in Christ.

*United Methodist Church, USA*

Grace, mercy and peace from the one God who confronts us a Creator, Risen Christ and ever-present Spirit.  
Amen.

***Something to reflect on***

Thomas was told, “Put your hands in my scars ...” Our Basis of Union describes him not as crucified and risen but as “the risen crucified one” – the risen Christ still bears the scars of his death. Resurrection does not remove the scars of death, it overcomes them.

What does that tell us about the human process of recovery from trauma and suffering?

What was your immediate response to the shorter reflection?

Was it unnecessarily provocative? Or did it seem like the truth at last?

Does it provoke an emotional response in you? What and why?

Tom Troeger (writer of the hymn about Thomas) refers to the earthquake account in Matthew. He says 1) that the earthquake is a symbol of the action of God, and 2) given how destructive earthquakes often are, this is a symbolic declaration that the old order is totally destroyed, the resurrection of Jesus has ushered in a whole new world order: old human habits and values and attitudes have no place here.

What aspects of human life could benefit from such a transformation?

“The Church at this point in history finds itself in precisely the same position as Thomas.” In what way, do you think? And what should it do about it?