

# Sermon 20170423 St Margaret's Uniting Church

## Rev Dr Barry T Brown – Text: John:20:19 - 31

*[These notes are in précis rather than verbatim form. Prepared in advance as 'notes for preaching', they may not reflect exactly what was preached. Preaching is peculiar speech, a dynamic form of communication that needs to be open to the leading of God's Spirit, faithful to the Biblical text, and mindful of the hearer's attention].*

**John 20: 19 – 31 (NRSV)** 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.

### **Introduction:**

### **Peace be with you!**

My second name is Thomas. My father's name was Thomas William Brown, as was his grandfather. If I go back another generation in my family I have four great great grandfathers called Thomas – Thomas Howe, Thomas Dodgson, Thomas Clay and Thomas Weaver.

The latter's father was also Thomas Weaver. So, in my family, there are at least eight men named Thomas; and that is only in the Australian branch. I am proud to have the name Thomas because it links me with today's story in which the disciple called Thomas is the one who affirms the risen Jesus as **"my Lord and my God"** - the high climax of John's Gospel.

## Understanding John's Gospel:

To fully appreciate today's passage requires some understanding of the Gospel according to John – which is in some ways quite different to the three 'Synoptic' Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). To begin with, it is recognized by most scholars that chapter 21 is a Postscript and that today's story brings John's Gospel to its climax.

The John's Gospel was intended for 2<sup>nd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> generation Christians who were part of a cluster of Christian communities living, probably in or near Ephesus (modern day Turkey). They lived in a conflictual relationship with a very conservative leadership of a new and emerging Rabbinical Judaism. This is reflected in the unfortunate and confusing way in which the term **The Jews** is used in John's Gospel.

John seldom uses the word Faith in the same way as the Synoptic Gospels do. Instead, to **Believe** is central. Whereas the Synoptics refer to entering the Kingdom of God (or of Heaven in Matthew), John's Gospel refers to entering **Life** (or sometimes, **Eternal Life**) as the chief gifts of God to believers.

John's Gospel has a whole series of **Signs** that point to who Jesus really is. The first Sign being Jesus turning water into wine... etc. These signs are followed by lengthy **Discourses** by Jesus. Other Discourses follow

from key encounters by people with Jesus – like, the woman who met Jesus at the well, and Nicodemus.

Also in John is a series of '**I AM**' sayings that are significant. I AM the Bread, the Life, the Way, the Light, etc. These sayings reflect the hidden name of God (I AM WHO I AM – see Exodus 3:14).

Another characteristic of John's Gospel, one which is not often noticed, is that there is a progressive appreciation concerning who Jesus really is. In the early chapters Jesus is recognized as "**a man**" (Prologue and John the Baptist). Sometimes Jesus refers to himself as the "**Son of Man**." In later sections Jesus is recognized as the "**Son of God**" (Nathaniel, Martha, and some Jewish, negatively). Finally, in today's story, as John's Gospel comes to its climax, Thomas declares the Risen Jesus to be "**my Lord and my God**". So, today's passage represents the pinnacle of the revelation that has been unfolding throughout John's Gospel as a whole. And these climactic words are declared by Thomas.

## Searching for Certitude:

The search for certitude, the desire for certainty, is often unrewarded. It is likely that some (perhaps quite a few) of John's readers wished they had been able to see and touch the crucified risen Jesus, as Thomas had been invited to. But this was not to

be. This is why the last words of Jesus are reported the way they were by John: ***“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”***

I have mentioned previously that I am presently writing a manuscript that describes the key phases of my ministry over the past fifty (50) years. I am now writing about the things that I believe, and those that I am now less certain about. The working title is ***‘Still Wondering.’*** You might notice that there is a double meaning to this title. It refers to a strong positive sense of *wonder* – as in the hymn *“when I in awesome wonder.”* It also reflects there are still some things which cause me we wonder about – to question.

A couple of weeks ago I watched the ABC TV series – *Stargazing Live*, featuring UK’s Professor Brian Cox. Pondering the vastness and majesty of the universe is both uplifting and humbling. On several occasions in this TV series and related radio talk-back sessions people asked for an explanation concerning two live questions: (a) *Is there and end to space, a boundary of the universe?* (b) *Was there a beginning of time before the Big Bang and will there be an end to time somewhere in the future?* Now nobody claimed to know the answer to such questions. These are things that are simply

beyond our human comprehension. So, even in human pursuits that are based squarely upon scientific research and knowledge, there are some matters that are beyond knowing, beyond understanding, beyond human comprehension.

I confess I don’t understand the Resurrection of Jesus. Yet, I believe it to be true. Over the years I have read lots of books that have tried to explain it forensically. Frank Morison’s book, *Who moved the Stone?* Josh McDowell’s *More than a carpenter*. Bishop Tom Wright has written five of an intended six volumes on *Christian Origins* in which he features his study on *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. I have to admit that while I have found such books to be very interesting, none has removed for me the questions about the resurrection’s mystery. I have found no convincing forensic evidence that can prove to me that a dead man could be alive again after three days. Yet, I believe in the resurrection of Jesus – not because I can prove it, nor because I can explain it. I believe in the resurrection because I have experienced his presence and life-changing grace – again, and again, and again. If it were not for this belief, this conviction, my life and my years of ministry would be one great sham. And like the Apostle Paul, I would be *“most to be pitied”* (see 1 Corinthians 15:19).

Earlier in this service I gave a brief introduction to the way in which passages from the Acts of the Apostles are designated for reading in worship over the eight Sundays of the Season of Easter. At first glance they appear to be a higgledy-piggledy selection of readings. However, on closer examination we will discover they are a deliberate selection of various witnesses to the reality of the power of the presence of the Risen Jesus with his followers in the times that followed the Easter events – Peter, Paul, Stephen (the first Christian Martyr) and others.

### **The Gift of Belief:**

In July 1981, at the Centennial World Methodist Conference in Hawaii, I shared a room with the Rev Ray Coleman, the pastor of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Washington DC. We had some very interesting conversations, sometimes well into the night. A few weeks later I had the privilege of preaching in Ray Coleman's AMEZ church in Washington DC (I think I was the only white person present in a congregation of around 300). The most abiding memory of our late-night conversations concerned how we each chose our preaching topics or the key reading for our sermons. Ray simply said: *Does it preach brother? Does it preach?*

Well, today's passage, the climax story of John's Gospel, the encounter between Thomas and the Risen

Jesus, does preach! It preaches, communicates and calls forth a response, because it addresses the honest difficulty of later Christian in having the same issues with certainty about the resurrection that was there for the original witnesses. It speaks forth: ***"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe"***. It is an assurance that it is possible to believe without seeing – and without touching (even Thomas did not need to respond to the invitation to touch Jesus)!

### **Close:**

Ultimately, **such belief is a gift**. It is not born of certainty, but of witness, experience and conviction. And witness, experience and conviction cannot be explained, nor can it be denied. It is this belief and conviction that comes as a gift of the Spirit, the Other Self of Jesus, in the ordinary, and sometimes the extra-ordinary, events and experiences of life.

***"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe"***.

Thank you, Thomas, for begging the question. For daring to name such things as uncertainties.

Thanks be to God, who holds all mystery in God's own being; and into whose **Life** we are called to live and move and have our being (see Acts 17:28).

Prayer: Lord I believe; help my unbelief (see Mark 10:28).