

April 12th, 2015. Easter Two.

Acts 2: 14a, 22-32, 1 John 1: 1-2 vs 2, John 20: 19-31

The day of Resurrection was a long day for Jesus' disciples and friends.

The women set off 'very early in the morning' for their sad task of anointing his body.

As events unfolded Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene, who did not at first recognise him.

With the other women they returned to tell the men what they had seen, but were not believed.

Finally two of them ran back to the tomb and were able to confirm that Jesus was not in it.

We can imagine the turmoil of the rest of the day, the overflowing emotions, the confusion – were they to weep in anger and sorrow at his death or leap for joy at his resurrected life?

He appeared to two disciples returning to Emmaus who encapsulated the feelings of them all – they were bewildered, empty, disillusioned and despairing until they listened enraptured to his exposition of the Scriptures and finally recognised him as he gave thanks for the bread they were about to eat.

Jesus then appeared to the disciples who were locked away in the upper room anxious, insecure and afraid.

We might wonder why – surely they had already seen enough on that day to at least hold onto an exciting anticipation – a hope that the testimony of the women and their own enquiries would have inspired in them.

Faith comes to us all in different ways and we see that on the resurrection day. The disciple John believed because he saw the empty tomb.

Mary believed when she heard Jesus call her by her name.

Most of the disciples believed when Jesus visited them in the Upper room. Thomas, who was not present, did not believe their story or the resurrection and in the tyranny of rationalism demanded the right to place his hands in Jesus' wounds, thinking that only sight, sound and touch could convince him.

When he did see and saw the marks on his hands and feet he made the strong statement of faith, "My Lord and My God".

Today we are given an additional blessing to Thomas's, for we believe without seeing.

Among the final words of Matthew's Gospel Jesus breathed a special empowering benediction on this small group of believers as he declared "Receive the Holy Spirit", giving birth to the Christian Church, promising peace, purpose and power and his presence with them always as he sent them to mission to the world.

The group were still finding their way, still frightened of the authorities, still locked up. They had been given the power of forgiveness. The pain of all that had happened was gradually being overcome by joy.

Jesus kept speaking of the peace that is beyond our comprehension; peace as a gift of God no matter what the circumstances.

All of us nearing a transition in life, a major experience that requires serious re-thinking, that re-sets our course, will create new opportunities and directions, open new doors, close others and change relationships (We seem to have them about every 7 years). You may feel some of the sensations that the friends of Jesus felt. I have fears and anxieties about retirement, about housing, about health, about the

changes for others that are inevitable. I need the gift of peace from God in each of those areas.

You may have other concerns that give you fear so that you want to stay behind locked doors in the mistaken belief that you will be safe. Hear the promise of peace. Hear the words of Jesus to us now – as sure as they were when he gave them to his friends: “I am with you always – even to the very end.” Feel the excitement of new potential and great opportunities.

Hear the promise of the presence of Jesus with his blessing of peace for St. Paul's during the transition process to enable a renewed mission.

Let us move to the original community of believers a few weeks later.

After Pentecost - which we celebrate seven weeks after Easter - the believers numbered over 5000 people. They had a remarkable unity; a community in a hostile world. The disciples had articulate speech and preached boldly. The church had common ownership of their possessions as it became the believers' new family. People had their own property and they had the right to keep it. If they gradually liquidated some of their assets then they would contribute to the church as they were concerned with the wellbeing of their new brothers and sisters. They were generous with love, focusing on the needs of others. There was not a needy person among them. In the ancient world people of ordinary means were vulnerable to changes in economic fortune. Not so this growing group of the new faith.

We know this type of community did not last for long, but it did serve a very valuable purpose, first being unified to withstand the persecution of those like Saul before he was so dramatically converted on the Damascus road. When the massive persecution of Christians began at the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 the Christians were highly mobile, not bound to their property and many succeeded in escaping. The community also had difficulties distributing the food resources fairly

amongst different racial groups and had to appoint people to help. God's grace was powerfully at work in the people. Belonging together as a harmonious community and sharing resources is a great gift to pray for.

That very courageous leader Martin Luther King realised that he was very afraid. A black church in Montgomery Alabama had been bombed and four children were killed. King had a wife and a young family of his own. He received a phone call with a threat on his life unless he stopped campaigning for equal rights. He paced the floor of his house. He had no courage and was full of fear. He prayed to God.

"I'm taking a stand; now I am afraid. People are looking to me. If I stand before them without strength and courage they will falter. I cannot do this alone." Suddenly he felt an amazing peace. This strengthened him to be the great leader he needed to be. Hopefully none of us will ever be called on to take the risks he had to, but it reaffirms a great truth about Jesus, whose grace is sufficient for our every need.

Let's reflect on our faith, our community life and our prayers for the gift of peace as we face change; giving thanks for each other, uniting in our common purpose and looking forward with anticipation to the future God has for us all.