



**Sermon preached by Dr Janet Bottoms on 12<sup>th</sup> April 2026**

**Readings:** *John 20: 19 -31; 1 Peter 1: 3 -9.*

**Easter II**

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*, out of fear, when *Jesus came* and stood among them and said, “*Peace be with you*”. They were afraid. They were ashamed. They were in hiding. And then - Jesus was there with them, in the room, and he brought them peace: his peace, not peace as the world gives but “*the peace of God that passes all understanding*”.

But Thomas was not there, and when they told him they had seen Jesus, he did not believe it. He knew better. He knew that Jesus had been arrested, executed, died. He was dead. His friends – these men he had walked with, lived with, and had looked forward to a wonderful future with – were deluded; they must be. They were the victims of a delusion, from a word meaning a “*deceiving*” or a “*mockery*”; a belief that, though false, is surrendered to, and accepted with the whole mind as a truth. Thomas was not going to surrender to any such mockery.

So Jesus came to Thomas and held out his hand to him. “*Put your finger here*”, he said to him. “*Reach out, touch - see*” And Thomas not only saw, but took the next step. “*My Lord,*” he said, “*and my God.*” My master – the man I have followed; watched in action; heard speak; seen bring healing to the sick and the blind - *-and my God!*” The One – the Eternal - the I AM – the Life. 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.*”

*Blessed*. It’s the same word as is used in what we call the Beatitudes; a word that brings together present and future the now and the “*to come*”. when pain or loss or grief are redeemed. “*Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted*”. “*Blessed are the merciful (even when that is difficult - pain-ful ) for they will receive mercy*”. “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled*”.

But also, “*Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven.*”

This is what Peter will later write in his Epistle to the believers in Christ scattered through Pontus and Galatia and Cappadocia and Asia and Bithynia – a whole range of people, men and women, who have *come* to believe in Jesus, even though they have not seen him, and have been suffering because of their belief. That may not feel like a blessing at present, says Peter, -but it is. It **is** “so that the genuineness, the strength and integrity of their faith, tested and refined, like gold, through fire, “*will result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.*” And that strength, that genuineness, is not only because they have “*come to believe*” . It is because they “*love him*”. If they were originally drawn to this new “faith” by the thought of death overcome, what kept them in that faith was love. “*Although you do not see him now,*” Peter writes, “*you love him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy!*” You love him. *Now!* In the present; with indescribable joy.

How do you love someone you have never seen? You respond, with love, when you realise; when you feel, and recognize, that you are loved. “*We love,*” we read in John’s gospel, “*because He first loved us*; “ and again, in the first Epistle of John, “*In this is love; not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.*”

God took the first step. Instead of expecting sacrifices from worshippers, as was common in most religions of the day, God provided the sacrifice, in Jesus; “*a man, attested to you by God*”, as Peter told the people of Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost, “*with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you*”. Jesus, whom you crucified but God raised up, “*having freed him from death because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.*”

This was the “atoning” sacrifice, the “at-one-ment”; God “*at one*” with man, and man “*at one*” with God - “reconciled to God” in spite of whatever the world might do; and it was for the people of

Pontus and Galatia and Bithynia, as well as for the disciples and the people of Jerusalem, and for all who have placed their faith in it from that day to this. “*Although you have not seen him*”, as Peter writes, “*you love him, and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him, and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*” The “outcome” of faith; its growth, purpose-led and strengthened through trial; and “*an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and kept in heaven for you.*”

Love, Faith, and a “*new birth into a living hope*” - that is the joy of Easter -but the word for love used here is not human passion, whether physical or familial. It is the kind of love conveyed in the Greek word *agape* - a free, conscious and sometimes sacrificial devotion rooted in commitment. Faith is also a commitment to absolute trust – “*the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*”, as the writer of *Hebrews* puts it.

As for “*new birth*” the phrase recalls for me the words of Jesus to Nicodemus, “*Very truly I tell you no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again* (or “*anew*” or “*from above*”). This is not a repeat birth; not human and mortal, in the flesh but in and by the Spirit; and yet, like physical birth, it must surely be followed by a gradual process of learning to see what is, at first, unclear; recognizing it when you see it again; and gradually putting together and understanding it, looking for, and reaching out to it.

Moreover, this “*new*” birth leads to a different perspective or way of seeing and understanding - different from the way of the physical senses. As Paul wrote in his second letter to the Corinthians “*we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen, for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.*” ( 2 Corinthians 4:18)

That’s hard. It is hard to live and think and act as if the things that we can see and touch are only temporal while the things that we are not able to see are eternal. In the world’s terms that’s the opposite of truth. It’s the physical things that are “*real*”; to attribute greater reality to what can’t be seen is foolishness. Yet to do just that is just a different way of seeing the whole of life – its meaning, its challenges and its joys; the way of Jesus, “*the Way, the Truth and the Life*”.

That is what Paul was saying when he wrote so challengingly and honestly in his first letter to the Corinthians:

*For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified . . .*

*Christ - the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.”*

Or again, in Ephesians,

*“I pray that according to the riches of his [God’s] glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend - with all the saints -- what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”*

That is the note of utter conviction, and of experience - of knowledge gained through joy and pain and mockery and wonder, and a compulsion to share this gift with others, in the power of the Holy Spirit given through Jesus. The more we read in the Epistles and other books of the New Testament the more we see how hard the apostles and other new Christians worked to find the words, the images, through which they could show what they had seen and learned for themselves, and - in spite of the world’s limited way of seeing – to make this understandable, a joy and a blessing to others.

*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed* – the note is there at the very beginning of the Easter story and rings through the years in hymn and song and testimony.

As for us, today, who come to it along our different paths, may we join in praying with those who have gone before and those who will come after us, in the words of the psalmist: “*I keep the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. You show me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy.*” Amen.

*Janet Bottoms: 12<sup>th</sup> April 2026*