**16th April 2023**

**Call to worship**

Come, let’s open our hearts and minds,
and raise our voices in worship–
together, in this place, right now!

**A gathering prayer**

Loving Lord,
we gather here, and in this moment, to worship you.
We come as we are – young and not so young, happy, sad,
worried, carefree – full of faith or maybe struggling a bit.
And we know that, here in this place,
we will meet with you, and you will meet with us.
Risen Lord, together, may we discover more of you,
and experience your presence
not only in our worship, but throughout our lives.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of approach**

The disciples told Thomas, ‘We have seen the Lord!’
But that wasn’t enough for Thomas;
he’d already missed out once, and he needed to see for himself.
We gather today, determined not to miss out
on anything you have in store for us;
our doors and hearts are open to you, O Lord.
Risen Jesus, meet us here today.
We need to meet you for ourselves.
Come, Lord Jesus.
**Amen**

**A prayer of adoration**

Father God, you are always there for us,
whether we feel it or not.
Lord Jesus, you come to us today, and say: ‘Peace be with you’;
we open our hearts and receive your perfect peace into our imperfect doubting lives.
Holy Spirit, you lead us to the fullness of joy;
we can’t wait to experience you more.
Come, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

**A prayer of confession**

Lord, the disciples came together, even though they were afraid.
Forgive us for the times we keep ourselves to ourselves,
whether through fear, or any other reason.
Unlock our hearts to you,Lord.
**May we stop doubting and believe.**

The disciples weren’t trying to lock you out;
they weren’t even expecting you.
Forgive us for the times when we, consciously or unconsciously, try to keep you at a distance–
when we just have ‘stuff’ that distracts.
Unlock our hearts to you, Lord.
**May we stop doubting and believe.**

Thomas really wanted Jesus to be alive, but he hung out for his own experience.
Forgive us for the times we take second-hand information
and miss out on the personal experience of the fullness of your presence.
Unlock our hearts to you, Lord.
**May we stop doubting and believe.**

Sometimes we do come, but without proper preparation,
rushing into your presence, and not thinking much about what will happen next.
Unlock our hearts to you, Lord.
**May we stop doubting and believe.**

**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Jesus freely gave the disciples power, through the Holy Spirit,
to forgive people’s sins.
And we thank you, God, for the touch of your spirit in our lives,
the assurance of forgiveness when we truly repent.
We unlock our hearts to you, Lord.
You grant us your peace.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

Jesus showed Thomas his hands and side;
the man was overjoyed at his presence.
We too are filled with joy to meet with you.
Thank you that you send us forth in your name,
to do your will, and to be your presence in the world.
Thank you that you are always with us.
In you there is a world of joys and excitement still to be unlocked.
We praise you, Lord.
**Amen.**

**John 20.19-31**

I don’t know whether you regard yourself as the trusting sort – who always sees the good in someone – give them the benefit of the doubt? Or you are a bit of sceptic: always believing the worst , that some people can’t be as good as they tell you – you struggle to take their word for it.

Trusting types often believe we are innocent until proven guilty and our guilt would take a lot of proving. The opposite sceptic believes no one is innocent and find it difficult to trust anyone.

We get an increasing number of people asking for our help because of the ministry of the food hub. It is a revelation to see the need in our community. I am often torn between believing them and taking their word for it and doubting their need and that they are just taking us for a ride.

If we look at human beings we will discover some who are constitutionally trusting and some who are constitutionally sceptical. We are on a continuum along which people find themselves between trust and doubt. Our background and personal experiences often contribute to our disposition.

It is a characterization, but they say the sceptics, the critical types perform the useful function of subjecting every idea or institution to a withering and critical test. They are the ones who will see the drawbacks in any scheme that is proposed. They will subject it to interrogation. If the test is weathered and the claim proved, they will come on board in some capacity. They may even become enthusiastic exponents of it, but they are rarely found in the front line of the cavalry charge.

Trusters by comparison often make things happen because they are not afraid of change. They can inject into a tired institution a new sense of possibility and hope. Their most precious gift is an intuition to predict the future, to dream dreams and see visions. They are all about faith and action.

The doubters can detect phonies and frauds though. Their best and enduring contribution to human history is their endless scepticism towards those in power.

Trusters can be easily exploited by con artists. Since they always give the benefit of the doubt they are suckers for a sales pitch and a good charismatic leader. At their most gullible they have a tendency towards dependency on the strong, maybe even a need to follow a leader. History if full of strong mad and magnetic leaders who led their suggestible followers to hell. Adolph Hitler Mussolini, Vladimir Putin, Donald Trump. There are people, movements and ideas that we can trust – and that is the flaw of the doubters, sometimes they can’t bring themselves to trust anyone, but there are also movements and ideas that we ought to doubt. Natural trusters contribute their share to the creation of circumstances within which evil flourishes.

In the church we have trusters and doubters too. It is one of the ironies in church life that people who claim to be real believers often seem to be operating from a rather weary and wary perspective on life. They are like people who don’t expect much good to come of anything any more. They have grown used to old words and old formulas from which they derive a security so they become passionately engaged in defending them against those who believe that things new as well as old can be brought out of God’s treasure chest and who leap on passing bandwagons because you never know what exciting place you might end up in.

We all struggle along this spectrum of faith and doubt.

Last week we had the triumphalism of Easter Sunday. This week it is the scepticism of doubting Thomas to bring us back to earth.

We have always associated the word Thomas with doubt. ‘You’re a right doubting Thomas’ we may accuse a pessimistic or sceptical person. Unfortunately, history has remembered him for this scene where the resurrected Christ made an appearance to the disciples in a home in Jerusalem. Thomas was not present and when he heard about the event he refused to believe it. Maybe he was the forerunner of modern day cynicism. Maybe the news simply sounded too good to be true. Thomas said: Unless I feel the nail prints in his hands I will not believe.

Now if you notice Thomas had separated himself from the disciples and therefore, in his solitude, missed the resurrection appearance. Maybe the writer of the gospel is suggesting to us that Christ appears most often within the community of believers that we call the church, and when we separate ourselves from the church we take a chance on missing his unique presence. It is sage advice that should you be going through a period of doubt in your faith don’t stop going to church. Go more! Where else will you here testimonies of God’s action in the world and hear the word of God – for as Paul writes in Romans chapter 10, faith comes from hearing…

There is the story of the person who was concerned that their faith had faded and their commitment to the church and the mission of the church had waned to the extent that they had left the church. They shared this with a trusted friend.

They were sat by an open fire as they talked about this lack of faith and enthusiasm. They noticed a coal drop out of the fire. The glow in the coal faded and it went black. Then the friend picked up the coal with tongs and put it back into the fire and soon it was glowing again. The point was made.

For Thomas, despite his protestations, Jesus graciously appeared for the second time. This time Thomas was present with the disciples and this time he too witnessed the event. This time he believed.

What can we learn from the life of Thomas?

Jesus did not blame him. I have heard a lot of Thomas-bashing in sermons but notice it does not occur in this passage. No one criticizes or rebukes Thomas for his lack of faith or for his scepticism. The passage does not tell us about how they put Thomas in his place; rather it tells us how Thomas was surprised!

Thomas says he won't believe until he can see for himself that Jesus is alive. What happens next? Do they hear Jesus' voice booming through the room, rebuking Thomas and imposing some penalty on him? No! Jesus immediately appears and meets his demands! Jesus did not criticize Thomas for wanting physical evidence, but rather blessed those who believe without it.

So if Jesus didn't penalize Thomas for doubting the resurrection, I don’t believe he would penalize you if you have misgivings about it.

In many ways thank God for the Thomas’s of this world. They test ideas, they detect phonies and frauds a mile off, they hold people to account and the powerful need to be held to account; they refuse to march in step to the beat of the loudest drummer.

He absolutely refused to say that he understood what he did not understand, or that he believed what he did not believe. There is an uncompromising honesty about him. He would never still his doubts by pretending that they didn’t exist. There is more ultimate faith in a person who insists on working through things until they are sure, or at least have enough to go on – than the person who glibly repeats things which they have never thought through, and which they may not really believe.

Thomas didn’t want second hand faith. He wanted to experience faith in the risen Jesus himself. Many people just accept the faith of their parents to keep them happy, or be the compliant child they were brought up to be. Without actually placing their trust in and experiencing the risen lord for themselves. ‘Lord if you are real, reveal yourself to me – come by your Holy Spirit into my life. Speak to me. Touch my life’. The sceptics prayer is an honest, seekers’ prayer

Of course, the Thomas’s of this world all have their downsides – but who hasn’t. One of their problems may be their fear of change and moving forward. You can get paralyzed by not being certain of all the facts –not totally sure of what the future holds that you are afraid to step out. There is no risk free universe, a universe in which the future is completely predictable. Since this is impossible the extreme doubter can be immobilised and stay put and hide in their bunker. They are the kind of people who won’t let their children go into the water until they learn to swim.

Maybe this was what was behind Jesus gentle rebuke: ‘Thomas you’ve seen me – I’ve answered your questions – now stop doubting and believe’. In other words you’ve got enough to go on – now move on.

And Thomas did. He doubted in order to be sure and he exclaimed this great profession of faith – my Lord and my God’.

Frederick Buechner, an American theologian writes that ‘whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don't have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.’

I remember doing an assembly in front of the sixth form at Rednock. Intimidating at the best of times, but as it was just after Easter I decided to talk to them about the resurrection.. I spoke about the Life of Brian and ridiculing the Christian faith and how a lot of people today think it is superstitious nonsense. Some of the more militant atheists think it is also dangerous and certainly shouldn’t be taught to children.

I said to those sixth formers that a belief in the resurrection is laughable – because everyone knows, whether you’re a scientist or not – that the dead don’t rise to life. But the Christian claim was always that God did something new with Jesus that has not been repeated since. That offends reason. The early followers of Jesus couldn’t believe it – hence these stories in the gospels of incredulity and doubt. Yet history and legend suggest that most of the disciples ended up dying for their belief that Jesus had risen from the dead.

It’s interesting that the legends surrounding Thomas suggest that he went off to India to preach the gospel. The Thomist Church in South India, mainly among the Dalit caste, traces its origins to him. The dalits are known as the untouchables because they do all the dirty jobs in Indian society – in particular handling dead bodies which seems very poignant if Thomas, the one who demanded to touch the risen body of Jesus, is their founder.

People will die for their beliefs if they sincerely believe they are true, but people won’t die for their beliefs if they know their beliefs are false. The apostles were willing to die for something they had seen with their own eyes and touched with their own hands. While most people can only have faith that their beliefs are true, the disciples were in a position to know whether Jesus had risen from the dead.

I shared with those sixth formers other arguments for thinking again about whether the resurrection happened or not- I concluded that none of those arguments could prove it. Most things in life we don’t need absolute proof and certainty before we act in faith.

I said that I sensed Jesus is alive when I pray, when I read the Bible, in worship and in meeting with others. I shared with those sixth formers how I believe I have been in the presence of Christ when I’ve seen a person die of a terminal illness but who had confident faith; when I’ve been with someone whose life has been turned around from despair and contemplating suicide to finding faith and a reason to live; to knowing someone who’s been struggling with guilt and is beginning to know the forgiveness of God and the ability to forgive herself. In all these ways I believe I can see Jesus is alive and at work. But I can’t prove it – it always needs faith.

I challenged them to be open minded and searching and not just take someone else’s word. I believe in the grace of God to truster and doubter alike, otherwise the cross and the resurrection is conditional and limited and God’s love doesn’t extend to those who doubt or reject Christ and we have to doubt the words Jesus prayed from the cross for forgiving those who crucified him.

Can you take a step of faith though? Do you believe and trust? If you are a doubter - do you have enough to believe and trust?

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who was assassinated 55 years ago last week on April 4th said, "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase."

There is a story about a pre-civil rights African American community in Florida. The story says that during times of political elections, this community would rent a voting machine and go through the voting process. Now, they knew that their votes would not be counted, but they voted anyway. When asked by members of the white community why they did this every year, they replied, "Oh, just practicing. Just practicing."

Believing in what is not yet seen means we practice or behave as if it is already exists. This is what leaders and visionaries do. They believe in something bigger than themselves and they begin to act as if it is so.

Martin Luther King, like other great Christian leaders such as Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela – had a strong faith in the resurrection – the hope of transformation – that God’s justice and peace would come – one day. The words he spoke on the night before he was killed were some of his most poignant and moving.

‘Like anybody I would like to live a long life. But I’m not concerned about that now. I’ve been to the mountaintop. I’ve seen the Promised Land. And I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the Promised Land. And I’m happy tonight. I’m not worried about anything. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

Thomas saw the glory of the Risen Lord. Blessed are we who haven’t seen but still believe and hope.

**Prayers of intercession**

Lord, lead us forward:
**lead us closer to you.**

Lord Jesus, we come to you today full of the thoughts of the week that has just passed – a week when your disciples had such a rollercoaster of emotions as they heard that you were alive; doubted the news of their friends; saw you for themselves and experienced your risen presence. As we think, in the stillness, of the week we have had we also acknowledge times of joy; confusion; sorrow; disbelief.

We bring our emotions and experiences to you now. Help us to see them with your eyes. Help us to step forward from this moment with renewed understanding of who you are and who you call us to be.

Lord, lead us forward:
**lead us closer to you.**

We pray today for our world. We pause for a moment to consider all the places that we have heard about in the news this week.

Lord Jesus, Prince of Peace, we remember places where there has been unrest and violence: Israel and Palestine, Ukraine, Yemen, many parts of Africa, more shootings in the USA. We pray for Northern Ireland as it marks 25 years since the peace deal was agreed.

Lord, you offered peace to the confused disciples in the upper room, yet the world is still such a place of strife. Help us to breathe deeply of your peace and learn to be peacemakers ourselves wherever we are.

Lord, lead us forward:
**lead us closer to you.**

Lord Jesus, our healer, we pray for the NHS and all those who have been affected by strike action this week. We ask for your comfort for all those who have had operations and consultations cancelled. We pray for those who feel that the cost of living means that they must take strike action. We pray for wisdom for managers and leaders and government. We ask that there will be conciliation on both sides in all the disputes so that this current time of unrest can be healed. In our own small way, help us to be people of reconciliation in all that we do.

Lord, lead us forward:
**lead us closer to you.**

Lord Jesus, the comforter, we pray for all those we know who are sick, sad or sorrowful today. We pause to name them out loud or in our hearts. Lord, we saw your love and compassion as you wept at the death of your friend, so we ask you to come especially close to these people we have named. Help them to know that your arms of love are wrapped around them. And help us to be bringers of comfort in our places of learning, work or recreation this week.

Lord, lead us forward:
**lead us closer to you.**

Lord, the first disciples were afraid of what might happen to them after your death. We pray for all those who live in fear for whatever reason. Bring them release from their fears and anxieties and help them to see a brighter future ahead.

Lord, lead us forward:
**lead us closer to you.**

Lord Jesus, you gave Thomas the assurance of your reality. We pray for all those we know who need the same reassurance... We pray that you will give us courage to tell our friends and family that we believe and trust in a crucified but risen Lord. Help us to be people of hope and to bring that same hope to everyone we meet. We pause to think about where we are expecting to go this week: school/work/home/new situations/difficult places/familiar places. Go before us into each place, Lord, and help us to see your risen presence shining ahead.

Lord, lead us forward:
**lead us closer to you.**

Lead us to the brightness and assurance of your resurrected glory.
**Amen.**



**A prayer for all ages together**

Loving Lord Jesus,
we pray for people who need:
strength when they are scared, (‘strong man’ pose)
peace when they feel muddled or anxious,
(as if smoothing out a cloth)
a smile when they are sad, (trace a smile on face)
a hug when they feel lonely. (hug yourself)
Help us to share your love in everything we do.
(shake hands with one another)
**Amen.**



**A sending out prayer**

Lord Jesus,
walk with us through this week,
support us when we try to see the truth
in things that puzzle us.
Give us courage to search for answers,
and hold us in your unfailing and all-encompassing love,
each and every day.
**Amen.**