



Readers' Service

A Service for Easter Day
or the Sunday after

Thomas and the Promised Land

by

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ORDER OF SERVICE

(A Service for Easter Day or the Sunday after)

CALL TO WORSHIP:

*Allelujah. Christ is risen.
Glory be to the Father,
and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning,
is now and ever shall be. Amen.*

HYMN (H&P) 190: Christ is alive! Let Christians sing

PRAYERS OF PRAISE AND THANKSGIVING:

'Christ is alive! Let Christians sing.' Indeed, Lord, we sing with full hearts and voices. The seemingly impossible has happened.

'Christ is alive, no longer bound.' You Lord have leapt from the pages of a book to be among us. What was their story is also our story now.

'Not throned above, remotely high.' Certainly not, for you stand among us now. With the hand of faith we can touch you without moving from our seats.

'Where colour, scorn or wealth divide,' you triumph over death and all his friends. You are here to make us your friends, make us one.

'His Spirit burns through this and every future age,' for by cross and resurrection, you have lit an everlasting bonfire by which the waste of human sin is forever consumed in the fiery fellowship of your living presence. Amen.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION:

As you stand among us, Lord, we hear you gently remonstrating with us for lack of faith. And it's true, we are a part of humanity which trusts more in material reality which we can see than in spiritual reality which we cannot, more in progress we think we can make by ourselves than in the transformation which comes only through trust in you.

And we know that's why we keep getting into difficulties of our own making. That's why we cause each other and ourselves so much pain.

You have reminded us, in the joy of Easter, that you are now and always alive among us. Take us firmly by the hand. Give us a moment now to say 'we are truly sorry.' Then let us each, let us all, hear in the

silence your word of forgiveness.

(Silence)

Our sins are forgiven. Amen! Thanks be to God.

HYMN (H&P) 215: Amazing grace

READING: Numbers Chapters 13 and 14

HYMN (H&P) 675: Have faith in God, my heart

SERMON: PART ONE (see attached sheets)

READING: John Chapter 20: 19-30

SERMON: PART TWO (see attached sheets)

HYMN (H& P) 196: I know that my Redeemer lives

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION:

Jesus our risen Lord, you have been through the worst that life can do. You have experienced doubt, defeated death. As you stand among us here, we pray for a world in need of resurrection.

We pray today for all who long for better things, but doubt that things can ever be better; for those whose hopes have been dashed, for those who feel that resurrection in any shape or form has passed them by, and shows no sign of returning.

We pray for all who feel that for them the promised land is barred – by giants of poverty, sickness and grief.

We pray for those for whom faith is just an empty word, not a living experience.

We ask, risen Lord, that you in your own way will give to all who, like Thomas, need to receive it, the gentle reprimand, the sign of resurrection, the second chance to make the act of faith.

You transformed the lives of your first disciples. You have transformed the lives of faithful millions down the years. And still you bring light and life, and faith and hope.

Accept these concerns of ours. Make us part of the answer to the prayers we ask.

Come, Lord Jesus, come. Amen.

OFFERING AND DEDICATION:

Lord God our Father, down the centuries you have given to your people many good things. And you have taught us always to be thankful with gifts. We make this thank offering now for resurrection stories of long ago and of today. It is our thank offering for the resurrection which defines all other resurrection – the rising again of your Son our Lord Jesus. Accept these gifts as signs that we are ready now and in the days ahead for you to work again your resurrection in our lives. Amen.

On the first Easter day, Jesus said to his disciples 'Peace be with you.' He said to them again 'Peace be with you.' (John 20:19, 21) Let us, this Easter, now share the peace of the risen Christ.

THE PEACE:

'The peace of the Lord be always with you. And also with you.'

HYMN (H&P) 212: Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son

THE GRACE

SERMON - PART ONE

THOMAS AND THE PROMISED LAND

[Here's a story of doubt and faith.]

The people were very near the promised land now. Moses thought it was time to find out a little more about the territory to which they'd all looked forward for so long. So, he chose some spies. He said to them: *'Go and see what you can find out. Have a look at the people who live there. We need to know how well armed they are; for we'll have to conquer them. And look at the state of the land; for we will have to make our living there.'*

So the spies went into the promised land. They surveyed town and countryside. It was the beginning of harvest time. They found the land in full fruit. They found abundant vines. The grapes were beginning to ripen. It was so good compared with the barren wilderness they'd been used to. Without being seen, two of the spies cut a large vine, tied it to a pole, and carried it back between them. Others brought back pomegranates and figs.

Moses and the people gathered eagerly, hopefully, to hear the news. The spies said: *'The good news is that the land flows with milk and honey. Look! Here are some of its fruits. But the bad news is that the cities are well fortified, both by the sea, and in the hill country. We'll not be able to conquer this land.'*

Disappointment clouded the faces of the people. Seeing this, two of the spies, Caleb and Joshua, took a more positive view. *'We believe we can do it'* they said. *'We can defeat these people. Come on,'* they pleaded, *'Let's go up and take the land.'* But the other spies shouted them down. They said: *'The men there are big, like giants. Compared with them, we're like grasshoppers.'*

The people's disappointment turned to anger - anger against Moses and Aaron. They said *'You've led us all this way for nothing. You've built up our hopes. And now we are told this. Better we had died in the wilderness than face this disappointment. Why has*

God brought us all this way just to have our men die by the sword, and our women and children taken prisoners?'

The cry went up: *'Let's go back to Egypt. Let's chose a new leader to lead us back where we came from. We may have been slaves there, but at least we were secure. Back to Egypt!'*

For a moment Moses and Aaron had nothing to say. Moses seemed to lose control of the situation. But Caleb and Joshua spoke up. They tried to develop their argument. They said: *'The land ahead is a good land. God told Moses it would be and it is. It's very good. If God is pleased with us he will lead us into the land flowing with milk and honey, as he promised. So let's not turn our back on God. And let's not be afraid of the people of the land. If God is for us, they are ultimately defenceless.'*

But the people wouldn't listen. They picked up stones to stone Caleb and Joshua.

Then God intervened. His mysterious unseen presence hovered, hidden by a cloud, at the tent of meeting. God was clearly angry. He spoke to Moses. *'How much longer will these people despise me? How much longer will they refuse to believe in me, despite all the signs of my protection I have given them? Do you know what I'm going to do? I'll disinherit them. They will no longer be my people. I'll start again with you Moses. I'll make of you a nation greater then they would ever have been.'*

Moses had recovered his composure now - and his political sense. Politely he said to God: *'I don't think you should do that. If you do, the Egyptians will get to hear about it. If you allow this people to die in the wilderness, the Egyptians will tell the people living in the promised land. They'll say: "The God of the Hebrews brought them out of Egypt. But he wasn't strong enough to bring them into the new land. He's a God who doesn't keep his promises. So I plead with you" said Moses. You are a merciful God. Forgive this people their rebelliousness.'*

God thought about that for a moment. *'All right,'* He said, *'I will forgive them again. But on this condition - that none of the people whom I led out of Egypt and who have constantly doubted my promise will themselves enter the promised land. I'll make an*

exception of Caleb and Joshua, though. They have a different spirit.' The people heard this. It didn't take long for the implications to sink in. The present generation of adults would not enter the promised land. That must mean more years in the wilderness, until their children grew up.

And that's why the people stayed in the wilderness forty years. And incidentally the spies who had persuaded the people to doubt God's promise - they soon died of the plague.

That story is in the book of Numbers. It was finally written down in its present form about 300BC - many centuries after the events it describes. It is not an accurate account of what happened. It shouldn't be read as such. Like much material in the first few books of the Old Testament, it's written to remind contemporary Jews, after return from exile, who they were and therefore how they should behave.

They were God's chosen people. God had given them a very special inheritance, purpose, place in the world. So when faced with difficulties, especially the threats to their existence posed by other more powerful nations, they should not doubt. They should have faith - like the faith of Moses, Caleb and Joshua, faith in the future.

This story is a story about doubt and faith. So is this next story.

SERMON - PART TWO

Here's another story of doubt and faith. And there are striking parallels between these two very different stories.

- The Old Testament people have, through their spies, sampled the promised land. The disciples have, through their time with Jesus during his ministry, had a taste of the kingdom of God.
- The Old Testament people have, because of the news that the spies bring, lost hope of entering the promised land. The disciples have, through the news of the death of Jesus, lost all hope of the fulfilment of God's kingdom.
- The Old Testament people feel locked in the wilderness, afraid of the giants who inhabit the promised land. The disciples are shut in a room afraid of the Jewish authorities.
- God mysteriously comes to the people at the tent of meeting. Jesus mysteriously comes to the disciples in their room.
- The Old Testament people doubt God's promise. Thomas doubts the risen Jesus.

But the parallel is incomplete.

The God of the Old Testament comes once. He is angry, and punishes the doubters.

- Jesus comes twice. Twice he says '*Peace be with you.*' He is gentle with doubting Thomas. He doesn't chastise him.
- He encourages him to look at things in a new way. '*Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed.*'

God, in the Old Testament story, denies the doubters a place in the promised land. Jesus keeps open for Thomas a home in the promised land, membership of the kingdom, by faith.

Rather like the Old Testament story, the story in John's Gospel was recorded and told, not just to report the life of Jesus. It was also written to help a community of early Christians understand who they were, and therefore how they should live in the world.

This is not just a story about the resurrection of Jesus. The community for which it was written were people baptized by the Spirit into the life of the risen Christ. They were called to share this life with others. But were second generation Christians, some from Samaria, some from beyond. They had not known Jesus in his ministry. They had not seen the signs of the resurrection. They were like Thomas. They doubted at times. They were constantly faced with the challenge to believe without having seen.

In other words they were like us, gifted with faith, but troubled with doubt, and needing to be reassured of resurrection, of the promised land, of the kingdom.

You may say: 'It's easy for you to talk about us as a community of people baptized by the Spirit into the life of the risen Christ. But it's not easy for me to feel part of that community. Like the people in the Old Testament story, I can see the fruits of the promised land. But I don't feel able to enter it. I hear what you say about the risen Jesus. But I'm not really sure that I believe what Christians are supposed to believe about that. Like Thomas, I don't feel it's true for me. And worse, I don't want to admit that in present company. For if I do, people will think I'm not a proper Christian.'

If that is what you're thinking, I have two things to say to you - first about doubt, and then about resurrection.

First, I believe there is a place for doubt in God's economy. Jesus was, as the Gospels suggest, afflicted by doubt to the end. John Wesley never really laid hold for himself on the inner assurance he so confidently offered to others.

In Jesus we know God is with us. But God is also beyond us. God will not be boxed in by the world of touch, sight and reason. In earthly terms we can never be sure of God in Christ. Doubt is always hovering at our shoulder.

But perhaps doubt is God's way of saying kindly to us: *'I understand why you cling to the sides. But as long as you do, you'll never discover the joy of swimming free in the waters of faith.'* I think that's what Jesus was saying to doubting Thomas.

Doubt need not be the enemy of faith. It need not be something you must conquer before you can become a Christian. Doubt can be God's way of prodding you into trusting him more. In one of his periods of doubt, John Wesley heard a friend (William Law) say to him *'... perhaps God is teaching you to trust him further than you can see him.'* That is the friendly word for us too.

And about resurrection: faith in the resurrection of Jesus is fundamental to the Christian way of life. Yes. But there is more than one way of coming to terms with the resurrection.

One way is to begin with Jesus. You say *'Jesus rose from the dead. I must believe that. Then all else will fall into place. I will come alive. And I will be a proper Christian.'* But another is to begin with yourself, with the little resurrections scattered through your own life. Let me explain.

A young woman died after a long cancer illness. The day after her funeral her brother and her father walked together along a deserted beach. They were crying, as they walked along, their arms around each other, leaving footprints of grief in the sand. It was a cold November day.

But God had laid on a treat. The sky was a soft clear blue. The late afternoon sun touched the gentle waves with gold. A seal lay quietly by the waters edge. It was as though God was saying to them *'Don't give up on life, don't give up on love.'* That was for them a few minutes of resurrection.

Here are some less dramatic examples:

- a shaft of new light suddenly shines on an old problem that's been worrying you; and the burden is lifted;
- the smile on the face of a child wipes sad memories away;
- spring flowers in the garden sunlight dispel dark thought clouds in the mind;
- you sense health returning after an illness - *'I feel better today;'*
- there's the hug of forgiveness after a row; laughter after tears.

See these things for what they are - signs of the resurrection. Then you can say: *'I know in part what resurrection means. I understand, I feel, something of the resurrection of Christ, because I have had a little resurrection or two of my own.'*

And the story of the resurrection of Jesus then becomes the unique way of interpreting your own resurrections, of stretching their meaning into the beyond. Your little resurrections in life become doors which the risen Christ is opening for you. And when the time is right, you will find a door to go through. And you will enter fully into the life of our risen Lord.

We meet together with the sunlight of Easter still shining on us. So let's ask God to liberate us from negative mind sets.

'The grapes are nice, but I'll never make the promised land. I am too old. We are too few.'

'The resurrection of Jesus is a wonderful story - but it's his, not mine. My feet are stuck in the mire.'

By faith all things are possible. Mountains can be moved. You can let go of the sides, and you will not sink. Despite circumstances and setbacks, the life of faith, the promised land, the kingdom of God and resurrection are present possibilities. And *'Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed.'*