

Some thoughts on John 20: 19-3, with a nod to the 2021 CTW Good Friday video.  
A sermon for the second Sunday of Easter.

I like the story of Thomas. It's very reassuring. It's OK to have doubts. Jesus is generous, gracious. He doesn't condemn Thomas for his lack of faith. Instead he shows him his hands & his side and Thomas responds with worship. My Lord and my God!.

Of course if Thomas had been with the other disciples for Jesus' earlier appearance, he wouldn't have had doubts in the first place. And now he meets Jesus because he is in the upper room, with the rest of the disciples when Jesus appears and so, because he is there, with the others, he sees Jesus for himself.

I had always felt it was important that Thomas was with the others. I have used this story to emphasise the importance of Christian fellowship. The necessity of meeting with other Christians to keep our faith alive, to still our doubts, to help us grow.

There is a story that I have heard a number of times from different sources in slightly varied forms. A man struggling with his faith, has stopped attending church. He is visited by an older, wiser Christian who sits with him beside the fire but doesn't say anything. He simply picks up the fire tongs and removes a single red hot coal from the fire & places it on the hearth. Slowly the heat fades & the coal goes black. The older Christian then picks it up again and puts it back in the fire where it immediately bursts into life again.

So I have always assumed Christian fellowship and attendance at church are vital for us to have a healthy faith. That without church & fellowship our faith, like that coal, would simply wither and die.

Those were my assumptions .... until this last year; when we haven't been able to attend church, when our fellowships have been broken, when we have only been able to talk to each other remotely on Zoom or by phone, when worship has only been available on line and when many have been very lonely.

So this year I looked again at the story of Thomas and considered it afresh alongside the other post resurrection stories. The story of Mary weeping in the garden on Easter Sunday. Where were the others then? Mary was by herself when she met Jesus. And on the road to Emmaus there were only two disciples, when Jesus came and walked alongside them.

Thomas was with the others in the Upper Room when Jesus came and stood among them. And so he met the Risen Christ but supposing he had not been there. Would he never have met Jesus again, never had his doubts resolved? I don't believe so. I think Jesus would have sought him out, wherever he was, as he sought Saul/St Paul on the Road to Damascus.

Church attendance, Christian fellowship are advantageous, beneficial but they are not essential. If we desire to meet with Jesus, really want to know and believe - he can and will meet with us, anywhere. Absolutely anywhere, in any place, in any circumstances. During his earthly life the human Jesus was constrained by time & space. The risen Christ, through the Holy Spirit can be anywhere, everywhere, for anyone, for me, for you. No exceptions. Corrie ten Boom once said the Nazi concentration camps proved there was no pit too deep or too dark for Christ to be present, to be there with people, meeting them in their time of need, in their place of need. Everyone, anywhere, no exceptions.

And there have been some good things about this year which I would like to hang on to if possible. This Christmas Woollahra church recorded the crib service in advance so on Christmas Eve I was free to watch the YouTube nativity service from St John's church in Harrow where my grandchildren had starring roles, filmed by my daughter in Croatia so that the other granny could have some authentic Mediterranean background for her nativity story and then later to watch my younger daughter singing in the Christingle service from Holy Trinity, Claygate. Only through Zoom & YouTube has it been possible to be in so many different places at once!

I still feel Christian fellowship and corporate worship are important and I am longing for the time when we can get back together properly, sing together, exchange a hand shake, or a hug, chat over coffee - just be together. But not everybody can physically attend church even in normal times. During this year I have developed a much greater understanding & sympathy for those who are never able to attend church.

Therefore we need to take into the future some of the things we have learnt during this year. We need to recognise that there are more ways of worshiping & fellowshiping than just turning up to church on Sunday mornings. We need to be deliberate about our relationships with each other. We were created in the image of God, as relational beings. Fellowship, contact with other people is important to us. As we come out of lockdown we need to ask ourselves questions about how we fellowship together and how we support those who cannot physically come to our church buildings.

Returning to regular worship & fellowship in our church buildings is important, something to long for and eagerly anticipate but it is not essential.

Our faith does not need to die because we cannot go to church

God is gracious, his love endures for ever, his love is available for all. The risen Christ is present now, here, everywhere, for you, for me, for everyone. There are no exceptions. Amen.