

JOHN 20:19-31
COURAGE

Did you tell anyone about Easter last week? Did you tell anyone that we collected Easter eggs in Church last Sunday? Or that we gave chocolate eggs to the children who were here? Maybe the opportunity never arose to tell someone about Easter and what it means, that Jesus died and was raised! Maybe the opportunity did arise, but we didn't take it! Why not? Perhaps we're not sure what to say; we're not quite sure we understand what Easter means; is that right? Or maybe (more likely?) our courage failed us: we weren't sure what reaction we'd get so we said nothing, just kept our mouths shut and said nothing; that way we can't get into any trouble and nobody can be offended by our Christian faith; that way we stay safe, with no embarrassment on either side; that way maybe our courage fails, but we miss an opportunity to introduce Jesus to someone who may never have met Him before!

Courage is not a word we use a great deal in church, but it is a key quality in the disciples of Jesus. Some churches in Sri Lanka are not meeting today because the leaders have seen more threats; I can understand that, but the Christians will need courage to go back to the places where their brothers and sisters in Jesus and family members were killed or injured. We do speak a lot about "encouragement" as something we do to help one another, but in fact it is the same word from the same root. To encourage someone is to "put courage into" their heart. Encouraging someone is not really about making them feel good; it is about giving them courage and strength to face up to the choices and challenges of life and faith. We need courage to speak about our faith, courage to be different from the herd in the values by which we shape our lives, courage to make public profession of our faith when others might laugh at us. Encouraging one another is about putting courage into one another's hearts and minds, something we should do more of, because we're in this together and need that kind of support. Courage is easier in a group than if we're on our own.

We see courage in several different ways in our Bible story today. We're in the upper room, the place where disciples were staying(?) in Jerusalem; it is the evening of Easter Sunday and most of the disciples are in the room. Thomas is missing, perhaps gone for a walk to help him think and be clear about the events of the day. Jesus appears in the room, all of a sudden, one of the marks of change in Him, this ability to appear and disappear at will. He speaks words of peace, shows them His hands and side, and challenges them to mission, while offering them help. Thomas comes back, disappointed to have missed out. One week later, they are all in room, this time including Thomas and Jesus appears again, ready to show Thomas the marks he so badly wanted to see. Thomas believes and makes the most profound profession of faith "*My Lord and my God.*" "*the disciples...*" (John 20:19) Where is courage there? It emerges in this encounter with Jesus!

The Courage to believe and perhaps more, the courage to admit that we believe. This is a huge issue in our world. Christians in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, parts of Nigeria – why would they admit to being Christians? It is dangerous because there are people who would attack and kill them for their Christian faith. Teenagers in school in Scotland might be examining Christian faith because they have a sense that they want to believe, but it might be dangerous to admit to that in our climate because they would be laughed at and may often be target for bullying and their life would be a misery. Let's look first at Thomas: he is given the nickname "doubting" because of this story and as if he is to be blamed for what he says and does, as if it is a fault, or a mistake, or he is lacking something. But he's simply not sure; doubt is "faith in two minds" (Os Guinness) and he is certainly in two minds. He hears what the women say about the empty tomb, but he's not convinced and goes off on his own. The very time when he's out is the time when Jesus appears in the room to show Himself to the disciples and the others see and Thomas misses out. He is still faith in two minds. On the next Sunday, Jesus appears again and this time Thomas is there: "*then He...*" (John 20:27) Here is the evidence Thomas needed; he sees with his own eyes the very marks that convince him this is the same Jesus who died,

standing in front of him. *“Thomas said...” (John 20:28)* Arguably this is the most profound confession of faith in the New Testament.

Putting your trust in Jesus requires courage. Stephen Hawking suggested that “heaven is a fairy story for people who are afraid of the dark!” Actually, Christian faith and discipleship need courage; it takes courage to trust and that’s what we’re asked to do. *“Jesus said...” (John 20:29)* Thomas needed to see; we don’t have that privilege, yet we’re also drawn to Christian faith and it takes courage to believe and then to admit to that faith. It took courage for Thomas to believe, to accept the evidence and profess faith, but it took the same courage for the others to believe in the risen Jesus when they were still not entirely sure what had happened. Questions, questions, questions and not so many answers; we are challenged to believe without knowing all answers – have we got the courage to trust Jesus under these circumstances?

The Courage to do mission: Here’s their calling – *“As the...” (John 20:21)* This is one mission in two phases, the same mission of God that Jesus started, goes on through His disciples and His church. Jesus had a real sense of being sent; He was sent into the world to do the mission of God and that is what He has done, ending in Easter. Now, the next phase begins, with the disciples being sent into the world to do the next phase of the mission of God. Will they accept the task? To make life easier for them, they are resourced for mission, given all they need to be mission-people: *“With that...” (John 20:22)* The Spirit would be poured out in a dramatic way on Pentecost, but here Jesus gives the disciples a taster and gives them His spirit, the resources of power, strength, grace and wisdom for beginning phase two of the mission of God in their world.

We read in Acts 5 just how much courage they needed. In the story of Peter and John they have been preaching about Jesus and performing miracles in Jerusalem. The crowds gather round them whenever they appear in the temple; Jews are jealous again. Peter and John are arrested and thrown into jail, but the angel allows them to walk free and yet again they are in the temple preaching about Jesus. *“We gave...” (Acts 5:28)* *“Peter...” (Acts 5:29)* and then they proceed to repeat the summary of the gospel that reminds the Jews of what Jesus has done and their part in His death. The Jews threaten death on the disciples; Peter and John putting their lives on the line for Jesus and for the mission to which He had called them. Maybe in the sanctuary of the upper room, when they were all there together and Jesus is there, it was easy to sign up for this mission, but this is the reality; this is what mission means, taking the good news of Jesus to people and places where it is not necessarily wanted or welcome. That takes courage.

Time and again Peter, John and the others tapped into the resources for courage, tapped into the power and energy and strength of the Spirit so that they could find new courage day by day. They did that by prayer: in these early chapters of Acts, we see the church at prayer time and time again, ready to ask God for fresh courage to meet the new situations they encountered. God answered their prayers and gave them the courage they needed so that they could stand up to the threats of powerful people and carry on telling the stories of Jesus. This courage is not in anything of their own character; this courage came from God, in the power of the Spirit, enabling them to stand up for Jesus in these hard places.

Christian mission hasn’t necessarily got any easier! The challenges today are different, but we still need courage to face them. In Scotland we don’t face the threat of death for telling the stories of Jesus, or for living a Christian lifestyle, or for turning up on a Sunday to worship – these are the challenges our brothers and sisters in Christ face in other parts of the world. Our mission to follow Jesus and tell others about Him and live a Christian lifestyle faces other challenges: people don’t want to know, they tell us that the Christian faith and religion is out-dated and irrelevant; they tell us that the Bible is an old book that has nothing to say to the modern world; they tell us that they don’t need God to live a full and satisfying life; they tell us

that Sunday is a day for doing other things and many are not interested in making church part of that. Against that background, we are called to mission, to tell people about Jesus, to live a Christian lifestyle and to be part of the Church.

That requires courage! I have been in Christian ministry and mission for more than thirty years now and I think that Scotland at present is the hardest culture for the gospel in all these years; it has certainly changed. It requires courage! God's Spirit is still at work to resource us as Christians and to resource the Church with power, energy, strength, grace and wisdom; Jesus still says to us "*receive...*" (*John 20:22*) and the Spirit still lives in us and around us. The way in which we tap into these resources of the Spirit is the same – we pray! We find power, energy, grace and courage when we pray, to ask God for help, to ask God to fill us afresh with His Spirit so that we may be and do all that He wants us to be and do.

Courage, brothers and sisters. Have the courage to trust Jesus! Trust Him to save you, just as He said; trust Him to guide and lead you through life, just as He said; trust takes courage. Have the courage to do mission, to complete your calling and look to serve Jesus; tell others about Him; live a Christian lifestyle; stand up for Jesus – that takes courage and God has given us the resources, His Spirit lives in us. Pray for fresh courage from the Spirit! Courage is a deeply Christian quality: the courage to believe, the courage to be part of the mission of God, Jesus and the church; this is who we are! Courage, brothers and sisters.