



BENEDICTUS
contemplative church

6 April 2024

Easter 2 (John 20:19-31)
life in God beyond doubt
© Susanna Pain

I have lived most of my life as a Christian, which is a very fraught appellation in this season, with so much evil and persecution perpetrated by members of the church, and particularly the church hierarchy, being a Christian alongside those who are conservative, and sure of themselves, who think they have all the answers. I stand alongside these people. My experience is different and so is my theology. At theological College I spoke of myself, not as black and white, but as grey, more questions than answers, doubt and faith, pondering and open and vacillating even. Now I would describe myself not as grey, but as rainbow coloured, containing multiple colours and textures. I still have questions. I still have doubts. I am still learning. I have life in God and in this community of Benedictus. What does that mean? It means, I sink into, lean into, absence and presence, wordlessness and words, feeling and touch and intellect. I have life, connecting to the ground of my being - call that God, or love or beauty - through meditating in stillness and silence and simplicity, through connecting with others, meditating together, eating and drinking together, worshipping together, and listening, in spiritual direction, and pastoral care, offering hospitality and visiting those in need. Life is renewed each day. It doesn't mean that I am not flat sometimes, not depressed sometimes, not stressed sometimes, but it does mean that at the core I know that I am loved. At the core, I am grounded and peaceful. I have life in Jesus, in God, and it is from that source that I draw life.

There are many things I do not believe and there are many gods I do not believe in. I do not believe in a vindictive God. I do not believe in God who pulls all the strings. I do not believe in an angry God. I do not believe in knowing all the answers.

I do believe in a challenging God. I do believe in a God of love and compassion and mercy, God who we glimpse through the Hebrew scriptures and the Christian scriptures, through Jesus' life and experience. I do believe in God's presence with

me, with you, with us, with all, no matter what the situation. I do believe in a vulnerable God who weeps, weeps for the particular, and for the state of our world.

Jesus breathed peace. After his death, he showed his physical wounded body to his disciples, and he commissioned them to forgive. He breathed Spirit on them, this body, spirit, resurrected person. He breathed peace on them. Only people who are alive, breathe.

'Receive the Holy Spirit', he says. 'if you forgive people they're forgiven, if you don't they're not.'

What does that mean? If you forgive you let go, you're free, if you hold on and withhold forgiveness, then there is still a burden.

The reading ends with the author's purpose: he tells the stories, signs he calls them, so that we may 'believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing we may have life in his name.'

'Believe Jesus is Messiah, the Son of God'? And 'have life in his name'? What does that mean?

We have just lived the story of Holy week and Easter. We are now in the season of Easter hearing stories of life, and questions and fear and faith and love. Today, our reading takes us back to Easter Sunday, where the disciples are still rocked by the events of the previous week, of course! The one they are grieving, appears. How is that? Appears through closed doors and offers shalom, peace. When they try to communicate this to their mate, Thomas, he doesn't catch the fire, he, for whatever reason can't take it in. It **is** pretty fantastical. He seems to need that physicality, that reassurance. And **that** he is given a week later. I don't get all this, how it happens, why it happens, but I come back to our conclusion at the end of the reading that the stories have been told so that we may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing we may have life in his name, life through this Jesus. John is saying through his stories that Jesus is the long awaited one, the Christ, the Messiah, the fulfilment of God's covenant to Abraham many many years before, but he is also, Son of God, deeply connected to the creator and is there not only for Israel but for all creation.¹

John 20:31 identifies two distinct, yet closely related, goals of his writing, **belief and life** - he wrote these things so the reader would *believe* in Jesus and have *life* in His name. Both are prominent themes throughout the preceding twenty chapters. Regarding the call to *believe* in Jesus, there are too many instances to list. But belief is not about doctrine. It is about experience, or encounter. It is about knowing, not

¹ <https://www.1517.org/articles/gospel-john-2019-31-easter-2-series-a>

head knowledge, but heart-knowing, getting Jesus, like the woman at the well who went with Jesus in their conversation, and really got him, and he her, and she shared her experience with others. She recognised her deeper self, and Jesus' self and received life, abundant life.

John speaks of life often too. From the disciples' confession in chapter 6 "You have the words of eternal life", to Jesus self-description in chapter 10 "I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly". Jesus' interest in granting life to a dying creation is unmistakable.²

I believe, like Thomas who eventually captures something, and does a complete turnaround to discover something new, something life giving, seeds of faith which will grow.

What does it take to believe, to turn around, to open our heart to something new, to turn towards life? Sometimes it has to be something very special for us to change our minds. Sometimes it is a kind gesture that speaks to our souls. Or witnessing ongoing generosity and faithfulness. Occasionally it is convincing words. Sometimes it is a fall, a trip, an accident, a break or tear in the fabric of our lives, which allows something to enter, something like love and grace, something to change and reassure us, a crack to let the light shine through. Light, Kindness, Love, or their opposites, darkness, grasping, hate, all the opposites which offer opportunities for transformation.

For Thomas and the disciples here, it is seeing the one they love, with them again, in the flesh, wounded, alive, but different somehow.

I think I've told you about when I was on retreat once at Aldgate near Adelaide, lying on the floor feeling, utterly useless and unable to do anything when I heard a voice say 'get up, feed my sheep'. 'What, me?' 'Yes, you, especially you'. I was totally surprised. I know the words echo Peter's story, but I was flabbergasted. I got up and turned around and began my life again.

Another time, I was grieving an old loss, the death of someone I loved, and many years later, with the help of others, I was able to psychically, let go of his hand. I grieved like his death was only yesterday when this was 20 years later. I let go of his hand. I still love him, always will, but in that moment, I let go of his hand which opened me to the possibility of new love, and not long after, in my 40s, I met Nikolai. I was on retreat at Saint Mary's Towers, when I had an experience of making love with God, of seeds of love penetrating and spreading through my body as I suckled at God's breast. Mystical talk, crazy talk but true nonetheless and life-giving. These

² *ibid.*,

moments stay with me and nourish me in the dailyness of doubt and faith, of life and death.

So here we are on the second Sunday of Easter on our journey through life wherever we are, with questions and inexplicable encounters.

Whatever your experience, soon we will meditate, we will let go of thoughts and ideas and memories and imagination. We will sit in the womb of our hearts opening to the divine. We may feel something. We may feel nothing, but we begin and we practice faithfully, and after time we may notice a change or we may not. In my life, I notice this way of praying, this Meditation, changes the way I am in the world. It shifts me, it gives me more space, life.

God bless you. I am grateful that we are companions on the journey of belief and faith and life, grappling with, asking the questions, engaging intellectually as well as letting go and letting be. Peace be with you.

Christ is risen. Christ is risen, indeed. Alleluia!