**Help with Unbelief. 11 April 2021 John 20:19-31**

I wonder if you have watched the movie “Evan Almighty”. It didn’t receive great reviews or even make its expected revenue at the box office, but I must admit I like it. Evan moves into the community called “Prestige Crest” and takes up a position in Congress. In his congressional campaign he claims that he will change the world. He prays that God will give him this opportunity! God’s plans however are clearly not what Evan had in mind! He is called to re-enact the story of Jonah, building an ark and taking his family and a swarm of animals into it. Evan is confronted with a wide array of miraculous signs which seem to transport him into a very literal re-incarnation of Noah. The movie highlights the momentous change in Evan and his life. It also highlights his stubborn refusal to believe that God is calling him to this task, until eventually the magnitude of extraordinary signs going on around him, convinces him that God is indeed calling him to this task.

The movie reminded me of the story we have just heard. The disciples were in the midst of an enormous time of transition, God’s plans were clearly not what Jesus’ disciples were expecting. We can imagine their minds would be reeling with the events they had experienced! Now they are in the midst of comprehending news of the resurrection.

**Moving from unbelief to belief**

Last Sunday we looked at Mary’s role in seeing and believing that Jesus had been raised from death, and then taking the good news of the resurrection to the disciples. We see that regardless of Mary’s news of Jesus resurrection, the disciples, (except Thomas and Judas) remained locked away because of their fears when our passage begins. Jesus reached out to them, he came and stood amongst them showing them the wounds of his crucifixion and they saw and believed.

Thomas missed out on this experience and their retelling of it was not enough to move him from unbelief to belief. (He may well have been in a similar state to that in which the other disciples were in after Mary spoke to them about her experience of the risen Christ.)
So again, Jesus reaches out this time to Thomas. He goes and stands amongst them a week later in the same place and this time shows Thomas his wounds and gives Thomas the opportunity to feel them for himself.

Jesus deliberately reaches out to each of his followers and provides them with what they need in order to believe. Jesus had always dealt with people in ways which honoured their individuality. Jesus, as a loving shepherd cares personally for each one. For Mary, hearing her name from Jesus lips brought forth faith, for Thomas seeing the wounded Jesus brought forth faith, for those on the road to Emmaus hearing Jesus talk about the Scriptures brought forth faith. Jesus engaged people in conversation, met their needs and gave them what they needed to move from unbelief to belief.

We, like these early disciples, have been called to share our experience of Jesus with others. In the midst of our sharing we can also be assured that God is active, that God can provide all that is needed for people to move from unbelief to belief. These disciples were able to physically see Jesus, and this aided their faith, however this passage also affirms those who follow later, those like us who are spoken of by Jesus in the words “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed”. Jesus provides all that is needed for anyone to move from unbelief to belief.

The passage from unbelief to belief was marked by joy, “the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord”[[1]](#footnote-1) and by commitment “Thomas answered him, “my Lord and my God,”[[2]](#footnote-2) Thomas recognised God fully revealed in Jesus, this is an amazing move for a monotheistic Jew. He now had a new and fuller understanding of Jesus identity and of his relationship with God. Finally Jesus gave them the blessing of peace, replacing their fear.[[3]](#footnote-3)

We also encounter times when we struggle with believing, so we can be encouraged that God understands us perfectly and can provide what we need in order to move from unbelief to belief.

**Moving on as a community**

The disciples met with Jesus as a community, in the midst of their confusion they still met together, and in this context, they encountered the risen Christ.

There were, no doubt, many things with which they continued to grapple. They struggled with much of Jesus teaching over the years, no doubt there was much to discuss now, as they sought to understand how to continue to follow Jesus. They needed help to understand.

Jesus met with them not just to confirm his resurrection but also to commission them, “As the Father has sent me, so I send You”, [[4]](#footnote-4) and to bless them with the ongoing gift of God’s presence through the Holy Spirit.[[5]](#footnote-5)

This group of followers were about to enter into the mission that Jesus had begun. How could they possibly do this? They were to share this message of Jesus death and resurrection. How could they do this in a way that people could understand and believe?

They could only do this through the ongoing activity of God. They needed an ongoing presence of God with them, teaching, empowering, inspiring, reminding, comforting and enabling them for this work. They needed to be filled with God’s Spirit. They needed God’s Spirit to be working to move people from unbelief to belief. So Jesus comes to them in their need and breathes upon them, encouraging them to “receive the Holy Spirit”.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**Moving out beyond their community**

This early Christian community was in a time of transition. Fear, doubts, uncertainty, questions and excitement were likely to accompany them. However resurrection life gives courage, unity, compassion and companionship with Christ to this community. Their life as a community is to be shaped by what they have learnt from Jesus and by the ongoing activity of God amongst them. As they take this good news to others they will continue to expand their understandings of the breadth of God’s love for all, and the practical implications of this in how they live. This small predominantly Hebrew community will become an amazingly ethnically, socially and culturally diverse group held together by their belief in Jesus.

We also find ourselves in a time of transition. There is huge uncertainty regarding what life will be like as we continue to live under the ongoing threat of the COVID19 pandemic. We know more than ever what it is like to be locked away and fearful. We recognise how important community is to each of us. We recognise that many have found their previous understandings of God inadequate in these times.

We continue as followers of Jesus to live with the call to have our lives shaped by the good news of Jesus, his death and resurrection. We are called to a unique way of living. To lives which encompass sacrifice, suffering and death but which are also enlivened by fullness of life, transformation, liberation and hope, through the good news of Easter. So how may these traits be embodied in our context?

We live in a time when isolation, loneliness, and depression are common features of the lives of many. Perhaps we should be considering: How can we connect with those amongst us and around us who live with these feelings each day? Stoic individualism further fuels such issues in our community. How can we develop a profile within our community as a place of warmth, welcome and acceptance?

As we seek to engage with the issues in our community, we do this knowing that God’s Spirit is with us, working in and through us and working in those with whom we have contact. We recognise that God alone can provide what people need to move from unbelief to belief.

1. John 20:20b [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John 20:28 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John 20:19, 21, 26 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John 20:21 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. John 20:22 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. John 20:22 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-6)