

COCKENZIE AND PORT SETON: CHALMERS MEMORIAL CHURCH
LOW SUNDAY APRIL 19th 2020 - prepared by Rev Tom Gordon, Member at
Chalmers Memorial Church and retired Church of Scotland Minister

This Short Act of Worship can also be heard in Audio at:

<https://chalmersmemorialchurch2020.podbean.com/>

Introduction

Welcome to this Podcast on the First Sunday after Easter in 2020, from Chalmers Memorial Church in Port Seton, in the lovely county of East Lothian in Scotland.

Well ... who would have thought that a few weeks ago, when we had come through Ash Wednesday and the first Sunday in Lent, here we would be, still separate from each other, the week after Easter – and, it appears, for a fair while yet. But – as someone said at the start of all of this – the churches may be closed, but the Church, the whole Church of Jesus Christ, is still very much open for business.

Robin Allison, our minister at Chalmers Memorial Church, has been sharing a podcast each Sunday since we have been in lock-down, seeking to deal with the aspect of social distancing that keeps us away from our church building. Like you, I've appreciated Robin's messages for us. And now, to give him a break, it's my turn. My name is Tom Gordon, and I'm a member of Chalmers church. Like you, I'm missing my church building – its beauty, music, worship, and, most of all, the fellowship in the church and in the hall for coffee and tea afterwards.

So, this act of worship is one way to keep that fellowship intact, to continue to bind us with one another, and to offer you the nurture of the Church, time for prayer and insights into the Word of God.

If you have a bible nearby, you might want to open it at John chapter 20, for that's where we'll find our reading for today. But, for now, let's take time to pray.

Prayer

Living God, you are our God, our *great* God, our God beyond our imagining or defining.

*Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
 In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
 Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
 Almighty, victorious, your great name we praise.*

So, it is right that we praise your name. For as we come into your presence – together or alone – you are worthy of all the praise that we can offer.

So, bless this time of worship, sharing and prayer. Bless us in our homes. Bless us in our openness to your Word. Bless us in our despondency and in our faithfulness. Bless us ... beyond our imagining. And, on this Sunday, we pray that we will be open to the blessing you offer. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

Introduction to reading

This Sunday, the first Sunday after Easter, is what is traditionally known as **Low Sunday**. In some Church traditions, there's a period after Easter called the "*Octave of Easter*". It's a period of eight days that starts on Easter Sunday and ends today, eight days later. So, this is the "*Octave Day of Easter*". Sometimes it's called White Sunday – but I don't know why – or Low Sunday – and I do know about that, and I'll share some thoughts with you on that theme in a little while. In the Eastern Orthodox Church it's also known as "*Thomas Sunday*". So, it's not surprising that the bible reading for today is about Thomas, and the doubts he had about Jesus, For he was in a low place after his Easter, so low, he just couldn't believe what was supposed to have happened.

Bible reading

John chapter 20 verses 19 to 31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Amen. And may God bless to us the reading of his Word.

Reflection

You can understand why Thomas was in a low place, can't you? Maybe he was sceptical. But maybe, also, he was more honest about things than the rest.

What was all this about the Resurrection? What was all of this about death being conquered? What was all of this they were telling him about Jesus being back? No wonder he was a doubter; no wonder the enthusiasm of the others didn't lift him from his low mood; no wonder he questioned, and mocked, and poured scorn.

Being in a low place is normal, and it really is OK. We are human, after all, and there may be many of us – me included – who feel in a low place with all that's been going on for us with Covid-19. And we may even wonder where God is in all of this. That's fine. Really it is. That's fine. And why? Because, if belief in God, the Incarnate God, fully human in the person of Jesus, is to mean anything, it means he knows about the human condition, low mood, doubts and all.

The English Philosopher, Bertrand Russell, said: *The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, and wiser people so full of doubts.* And Alfred, Lord Tennyson, wrote: *There lives more faith in honest doubt than in half the Creeds.* Doubting is honest; doubting is human; and – according to Russell – doubting is a sign of wisdom. You know, I have a real sense that Jesus wants us to be fully what we are, not to ditch our humanity when we come to him, but to tell it as it is.

Back in the 1990s, I ran a course for ministers when I was chaplain at my hospice. We did lots of stuff – like understanding pain control; dealing with distressed relatives; how to look after yourself. But we reflected theologically too. For one session, I invited Professor Robert Davidson – or Bob Davidson as I knew him – then professor of Old Testament in Trinity College Glasgow, to reflect with us on faith and suffering. I remember him telling us starkly that there are more verses of lamentation in the bible than there were verses of praise. Wow! Lamentation, complaints, concerns ... it's all there, he said. Now, there's a thing! But he also went on to explore doubt, pointing us to his 1983 publication, *The Courage to Doubt*. He spoke a powerful word to those Christians who find themselves forced to question and doubt, and often do so with an unnecessary guilty conscience. "An unnecessary guilty conscience" in the face of doubt. There's another "Wow!"

In his book, Bob Davidson concludes in this way: "It is the struggle to maintain certainties in the midst of uncertainty, in the painful groping for new light in the midst of darkness that seems total, that [the bible] bears its clearest witness to the courage to doubt." *That could*

have been written for the present crisis in which we find ourselves, couldn't it? It is the struggle to maintain certainties in the midst of uncertainty, in the painful groping for new light in the midst of darkness that seems total, that [the bible] bears its clearest witness to the courage to doubt. And that could have been written for Thomas on Low Sunday. Because, for him, doubt was real, and Jesus needed real, anchored, fully human people to be his disciples. And in Thomas, was an honest response to what others had told him. And with Thomas, doubt was the hook, the issue that Jesus responded to. And for Thomas, doubt was the beginning of faith. For there was no rejection from Jesus, no mocking, no dismissiveness, no put-down. There was, instead, acceptance and dialogue and the call again to faith. Thomas had the courage to doubt, the courage to be real, the courage to be honest, the courage to be broken, the courage to know and accept Jesus again.

Before all this crisis descended on us, I wrote a hymn for Low Sunday. We can't sing it together – maybe another year – but here's what it says ... and, on this Low Sunday, perhaps it says all that needs to be said – for Thomas, for Bob Davidson and for you and me today. For in all of our doubts we have today what Thomas had 2000 years ago – the risen Christ, still with us, still accepting, still calling, still in need of his honest disciples.

*When Easter joy is set aside and time moves us along;
When shouts of triumph fade away – what then shall be our song?
We'll take the Easter story on and find new words that say:
"This is our truth; this is our life; our Lord is risen today."*

*When week by week we move beyond our Easter hymns of praise;
When we descend from heights of faith – how shall we live our days?
We'll journey in the Easter light, as much for now as then.
The truth's not just for Easter tide, when Christ is risen again.*

*When affirmation's voice has ceased and normal life returns;
When faith's a struggle day by day – what trust need we to learn?
For now and all our future days this is our constant creed –
God's promise is for all of life: the Lord is risen indeed!*

What Thomas learned is that the risen Christ isn't left behind at Easter time. The risen Christ is for all time, Low Sunday and all. The risen Christ is for all people, including those of us who doubt. The risen Christ is for all circumstances, including those we find ourselves in just now. The risen Christ is for all creation – if only we would realise that truth.

Prayer

So now, let us pray: Living God, we come to you as we are, a jumble of conviction and uncertainty, lamentation and praise, faith and doubt. So, accept us as we are, for you made us human, and you understand the human condition. Strengthen our conviction, and embrace our uncertainties. Comfort us in our lamentation and accept our praises. Rejoice

in our faith and understand our doubting. Stand with us when we need you most – when we are high with excitement or cast low with anxiety. And as you rose on Easter day, may we rise with you on Low Sunday, and walk with you on the journey of faith.

And we pray for all those whom have on our hearts today.

- Those close to us, in body and in spirit.
- Those who care for us, and guide us, and nurture us.
- Those who lead us and stand for what is right and good for all.
- Those who suffer – especially in this present crisis.
- And for ourselves – in all that we need.

SILENCE

And on this day, one week on from Easter, may we find your presence still with us; may we see your light still shining; may we know your word still speaking; may we find your hand still blessing; may we hear your call still sounding.

And we say the Lord's Prayer together.

*Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory, forever.
Amen.*

The Blessing

Go in peace, to love and serve the Lord.

*The Lord bless you and keep you.
The Lord make his face to shine upon you,
and be gracious unto to you.
The Lord lift up his countenance upon you,
And give you peace. Amen*