

## Readings for the Second Sunday of Easter

27<sup>th</sup> April 2025

### First Reading: Acts 5:27-32

When the temple police had brought the apostles, they made them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, saying, 'We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us.' But Peter and the apostles answered, 'We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.'

### Second Reading: Revelation 1:4-8

John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen.

'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

### Gospel: St John 20:19-31

It was evening on 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.

### **A Reflection for the Second Sunday of Easter**

Last Sunday, Easter day, when I drove across to Achiltibuie, I saw the tremendous devastation across the hillsides around Stac Pollaidh caused by the recent wildfire. It reminded me of an occasion some years ago when my home in Gairloch was threatened by a similar wildfire, at the same time of year. It's an event I remember only too clearly.

From Gairloch, there is a wonderful view across the sea to Skye; depending on your position, you can see the Cuillins in the distance or across to Lewis and Harris, when the weather is good. It was like that on the day I remember, beautifully sunny and clear.

But it didn't stay like that. I thought at first that there was a haar coming in, but it was coming from the wrong direction, off the land. It was only when I went outside that I realised that the cloud was smoke, that there was a significant wildfire on the hillside not far above the village. The dense cloud of smoke soon obliterated the beautiful view in a way that ordinary clouds don't often manage.

When a significant negative event occurs in our lives, it can cloud our vision in a similar way. The disciples seem to have been in such a position at the start of today's Gospel reading. The evening of the first Easter day finds them in fear behind locked doors. Last week, in the account of the events of Easter morning, we were told that they didn't yet understand the Scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead. Despite Jesus' teaching and the raising of Lazarus, this was still way beyond their limited human expectations. If they believed Mary Magdalene's testimony that she had seen the risen Jesus that morning, it doesn't seem to have overcome their feelings of loss and despair, or the disappointment of unfulfilled hopes of a triumphant Messiah.

And, like Mary, they didn't appear to immediately recognise Jesus when he appeared among them. As Bishop Mark said in some of his sermons last weekend, that is understandable. We can probably all think of occasions when we have met someone out of context and struggled to place them. And we don't expect to meet people we have seen die. It's also probable that their vision, their understanding, was clouded by grief, fear, anger, tiredness... The recognition came only when he showed them his wounds ... and then there was joy, even euphoria. They were transformed. The scales were lifted from their eyes and finally they saw clearly.

Jesus did not rebuke the disciples for their lack of understanding, or for their earlier desertion of him, or Peter for his denials that he knew Jesus. Nor did he rebuke Thomas later for his doubts. Instead he accepted the disciples as they were, human and flawed, and commissioned them to continue his work in the world: 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you'. In this account from John's Gospel, they were given the Holy Spirit at this point, to become like Jesus. Luke, of course, delays the giving of the Holy Spirit until Pentecost. Nevertheless, the message is the same: they were sent to proclaim the resurrection and to love and forgive as Jesus does. It was the beginning of the new community of believers, the church.

The other readings today show us something of how that work progressed, two snapshots. In the passage from Acts, the disciples were living out their commission in the early days of the church in Jerusalem. They have been arrested for the third time for preaching about Jesus in the Temple, contrary to the instructions of the High Priest. The High Priest and the Council were fearful, protective of their own interests. Their authority was not being respected and the situation was getting out of hand. The message of Jesus' resurrection had, in modern parlance, 'gone viral' despite their best efforts to stop it. No longer timid and fearful, the disciples asserted their priority was 'to obey God'. They also offered repentance and forgiveness to Israel, which included the High Priest and his associates.

The passage from Revelation addresses the churches in Asia Minor later in the history of the early church, reminding them of their call to be God's people, living out God's purposes in the world, and to remain true to those purposes, until Christ comes again.

The account of Jesus' death and resurrection, and the call to the church to proclaim the message of salvation has stood the test of time. It may sometimes seem otherwise in our sceptical society, but two thousand years later the message continues to be proclaimed across the world. There have been attempts to de-bunk it, but none has succeeded. Some years ago, I was lent a book by a colleague called 'Who Moved the Stone?' by Frank Morison. Writing early in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and originally published around 1930, Morison was a sceptic who set out to disprove the resurrection by careful research and analysis. He failed and ended up believing in its truth. There are many other such examples.

The church today is still called to bear witness to the resurrection, sent by Jesus to a life of freedom, of love and service, of repentance and forgiveness. To live transformed lives that resist greed and self-interest, that challenge exploitation and oppression of the vulnerable. As it says at the end of today's Gospel:

...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.

This is not mere existence, but a life transformed for eternity.

Of course, like the first disciples, we are human and flawed. Our Christian faith can be a struggle. Like wildfires, the smoke of the distractions of this world gets in our eyes and obscures our vision of the way ahead. We get it wrong sometimes; we make mistakes, sometimes deliberate errors. We succumb to self-interest and greed. We turn a blind eye to something we should challenge. We wonder and doubt, we turn away and try to hide.

The other thing that I noticed as I drove past Stac Pollaidh last Sunday was that, despite the extensive damage, the green shoots of grass beginning to grow again were everywhere. The scar on the landscape was already starting to heal.

When we do get it wrong in our lives, when we fail to live up to our calling as people of the resurrection, we need to be reminded that, just as with those first disciples, Jesus accepts us as we are. He loves us and forgives us in all our inconsistencies and backsliding. The fire can be dampened down, the good will begin to grow again and the scar start to heal. Just as he helped Thomas to see and believe, he invites us to do the same and to follow him.