**Sermon Easter 2B.**  19th April 2020 Dunedin Methodist Parish

Have we all seen the film *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*? It opens with an exasperated, newly widowed woman, played by Judi Dench, on the phone to a call centre in India trying to change her late husband’s internet bank account. This lady is adrift following his death, he had debts she was not aware of and it seems that her future will be to see out her days lodging in the spare room of one of her sons. A series of other characters are introduced whose prospects on retirement seem equally unappealing.

So rather than a life as their child’s lodger, or as an on call babysitter or in a retirement village in a windswept English seaside resort they all decide to move into a hotel in the Indian city of Jaipur that caters for long term older residents. Now I am not contemplating retirement – roll on 2032 - , though having been to Jaipur I can tell you it is a beautiful place. What this film brought home to me was to beware of the language used by Indian hotel owners to describe their establishments; historic and characterful really means run down and decrepit.

For all its faded charms though the hotel becomes home for most, if not all, of its British residents.

During the movie Judi Dench’s character decides that, for the first time in her life, she will get a job and not just any job. She discovers that Jaipur is home to the call centre which so frustrated her. She introduces herself to the manager and manages to get a job as a cultural advisor; teaching these young Indians on how to communicate with older British people.

Part of that is knowing that you are talking to an individual, a real and unique person, and treating them as such. You must acknowledge them. You must call them by name. Another human being is not someone upon whom we inflict our prepared script; she or he is unique in all the world and we acknowledge that by calling them by their name.

When I trained in pastoral care I learnt this saying;

“*We are each of us like everyone else, we are all like some other people, we – each of us – is unique*.”

On this second Sunday of Easter we always hear the story of Thomas. Almost always that leads into a sermon on faith and doubt. I don’t want to go there other than to say that poor old Thomas gets a bad press I think, all he ever asked for is what we expect when we are told something important and potentially life changing; he simply wanted proof.

Rather than say doubt is bad – which I would never do – or tell you it is the twin of faith – which I think I say fairly often I would like to reflect upon another aspect of the encounter between Thomas and the risen Jesus.

We are told that Jesus had appeared earlier to the other disciples and that Thomas had not been present. Imagine yourself in his position when he returned only to be told that it’s all true – Jesus is risen and has just appeared to the others.

But a week later all the disciples – Thomas included – were together when Jesus once more appears amongst them and greeted them; “Peace be with you.”

Then he turns to Thomas and invites him to reach out and touch his wounds so he can feel for himself how real they are.

In fact Thomas doesn’t reach out and touch, there is no need. Jesus – who was dead and is now risen – is there before him and has spoken to him personally; Jesus spoke to his doubt and need and in light of that the only thing left to do was to believe;

“My Lord and my God.”

The resurrection of Jesus isn’t made known to Thomas by the testimony of his friends or by some early theologising about it, it is made known by the Risen One.

This Easter has seemed strange, it has seemed like a litany of losses, no joyful Palm Sunday procession, no Holy Thursday Vigil or sharing in Good Friday Worship, no joyful gathering at Easter. but in our Gospel today we have Jesus appearing behind closed doors to people in fear, we hear him speak Peace and offer his wounds as witness to his resurrection.

The one who came into a locked room comes now into our bubbles, he comes speaking peace and calling us to life.

The resurrection is not about a corpse that got up and walked around. A casual reading of the stories we hear over Easter tells us this. Jesus appears then disappears, he is suddenly amongst his friends in a locked room and they know him straight away, at other times he comes alongside people for a while – think about the walk to Emmaus – and is only finally recognised right at the end and then he is gone.

We cannot offer proof in the way that proof is generally demanded. We are children of the modern world. The gold standard of any claim is proof. Can we see it, weigh it or measure it? The more proof the better – if our doctor suspects a serious illness she or he will order a clutch of tests. The more results can be shown the more certain and authoritative the diagnosis and the more clear the course of treatment.

Thomas is a man of our age – all he ever asked for was what we are conditioned to demand all the time. That we do so for most things is entirely prudent and right.

Yet the resurrection, and the other claims of faith, cannot be proved in this way. Which is perhaps why religion struggles in a society like ours because things we can test and prove are regarded as more “true” than anything else.

It is also the reason for the origins of Christian fundamentalism. If you look at people who send expeditions to find the remains of the Ark on Mt Ararat or who fund research into what is called Creation Science you see a reading of the *Bible* as a scientific text with scientific method then being used to establish it. Some Christians in the nineteenth century realised science was now what defined truth; thus the *Bible* could only have a literal meaning and its claims could be tested. Should any of you ever want a talk on why this is very bad theology I am happy to do that – but not now.

Yet when it came to it Thomas did not need that sort of proof. He didn’t need to touch the wounds to know that he was in the presence of Jesus, who had died and was now risen.

What of all of those who would come after? Who would never be afforded a glimpse of the risen Jesus?

“*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe*.”

We cannot claim to believe in the resurrection because we have seen the risen Jesus. What we have encountered though, the proof of resurrection for us is the community gathered around it. The church is this community, gathered around the resurrection. The place which nurtures new life and possibility, the place where we experience redemption, healing, mercy and grace.

We often read today’s texts in a very personal way, after all how Jesus appeared to Thomas and offered him the very proof he longed for is a personal story, likewise faith in and giving an account of the resurrection can seem very personal things. Personal yes, exclusively so, no.

The trauma of the pandemic is bringing uncertainty, fear, pain and death. Yet all round the world the best of humanity is seen in care, altruism, and self- giving love. Everywhere there is life and intimations of resurrection. and give witness to the resurrection.

Christ’s body once more is marred by wounds, and with it the whole of humanity, we hope and pray that in time these wounds attest to resurrection. In response to these unimagined times we can find it in ourselves to reach out, and in doing so find our best selves. Amen