At this stressful time for so many people, the contrasting emotions of moving from Lent and Good Friday to the joyful sense of Easter renewal acquire increased poignancy –a sadness at the (outwardly) muted celebrations that the current crisis necessitates, that’s if we truly care about the safety of other human beings rather than just our own wellbeing. As Christians, we *must* see that the commandment to “love our neighbours as ourselves” is not open to debate about the extent to which it must be observed.

On the 19th of April, we were due to share in a Circuit Service, which would serve to remind us that, as the Methodist People, we represent much more than just our individual churches. Whilst we cannot be physically together, we can certainly continue to be spiritually and prayerfully together – and I am sure that we would not have to reflect for very long before coming up with examples of answers to prayer!

In the Gospel reading, the risen Jesus responds to the confession of Thomas (“My Lord and my God”) with the words ***“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (John 20:29).*** It’s that blessing from Jesus that links the Gospel reading and the text that I have used from 1 Peter. In this passage, the writer says that the ‘exiles’ – his audience – love and believe in Jesus Christ although they have not seen him (verse 8).

Actually, *both* of the texts acknowledge the difference between the *experience* of those who came into contact with Jesus during his ministry and those whose faith comes as a response to stories about Jesus’ ministry. Thomas had the opportunity to examine the risen Jesus, an opportunity unavailable to us. But I don’t think that we should over-exaggerate this contrast, because it seems that many of Jesus’ contemporaries *saw* him and *still* chose not to believe!

What the ‘Peter’ reading says to us is that it’s not so much about what the resurrection *implies* about Jesus, but what it *accomplishes* for us human beings: **a new birth, inheritance and salvation.** The audience of 1 Peter consisted of people who had never seen Jesus, but their faith had caused such a disruption of their ordinary lives that it was referred to as a ‘new birth’. So the resurrection somehow brings about the ‘new birth’ of human beings and this image of ‘new birth’ crops up in other parts of the New Testament as well of course, just as it does in a variety of traditions and usually in connection with conversion to a different faith or to a significantly altered point of view. I think that the picture being painted is that all those who are reborn through the resurrection of Jesus Christ belong to a ‘family’ that nurtures them and protects them from the menaces of the outside world. It grants to the ‘newly born’ a ‘living hope’. The word ‘living’ seems a bit pointless to include really, because a ‘dead’ hope wouldn’t be much use to anyone, would it?

We are all very much aware of the current menaces of the world – and one in particular which is disrupting everyday life on a large scale. For some, sadly, the Coronavirus is doing much more than just disrupting everyday routines and working practices. For those people it has meant the loss of loved ones from whom they had to be isolated

in the final stages of their illness and this has been made even more hard to bear by the restrictions on how funeral services must necessarily be conducted in current circumstances.

When put into context, the ‘new birth’ to this ‘living hope’ about which scripture tells us, comes through Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. Death has been defeated and new life is the result. But we need to keep in mind that this new life isn’t just about living a bit longer biologically. It means “an unfading, imperishable inheritance”, experienced through an eternity with our Creator. As most things that are inherited can be lost or diminished in some way, the idea of an inheritance that *can’t diminish* takes us back to the contrast between death and ‘living hope’. Our resulting faith as believers will save us through the ‘rebirth’ that our faith leads us to experience.

I don’t think that we need a flash of lightning or a crash of thunder or a voice from the sky to feel ‘reborn’. For me, in times of fear and difficulty and – yes – panic sometimes, it has been a sense of being held and accompanied. The result has been that, although occasionally at the worst moments, I have temporarily forgotten about God even BEING THERE, I have been calmed as if by a quiet, gentle, reassuring voice and unlike Thomas (but I am not criticising him for it), I don’t need to see or touch Jesus to know he is there for me. On other occasions, God may be giving me a firmer ‘prod’. But whatever the method of delivery, the message is always the same ***“You are loved and will be looked after. Wherever human life leads, you will not travel alone.”***

The two appearances of Jesus to the gathered disciples – with and without Thomas – are quite similar in several ways. Jesus comes, despite closed doors, on the first day of the week and offers the same greeting – and yet the stories of his appearances have a different role in the gospel account.

The first appearance in chapter 20 verses 19 to 23 is really describing the beginning of the church. All the **components parts** are there: ***a company of disciples, the risen Christ; the sending of the church into the world; the giving of the Holy Spirit and the message of the forgiveness of sins.*** Just as Jesus is sent by the Father with a mission, so the church is sent by Jesus with a mission. Just as Jesus has been the bearer of the Spirit, so the church is the bearer of the Spirit. Just as Jesus has declared the forgiveness of sins, so the church declares the forgiveness of sins. The Christian community is to take its shape and its purpose from Jesus.The church will be hated as Jesus was hated (15:18). The church is to be one as the Father and Jesus are one (17:20-23).

For some reason Thomas was absent and when he is informed of Jesus’ visit, he is sceptical. Not only does he need to ***see*** Jesus, he needs to ***touch*** him. He requires firm evidence that the person he sees is the same person who was crucified.The second appearance of Jesus in verses 26 to 29 is about the *basis* of faith. There is a reminder in the text about the absence of Thomas from the first appearance and his doubting of what the other disciples told him. When Jesus comes, his doubt is removed and Thomas expresses sincere belief and faith.

Actually Thomas proclaims his belief seemingly ***without*** ***actually touching*** Jesus. He goes further than the other disciples, who described Jesus as ‘the Lord’. Thomas calls Jesus ***‘My Lord and my God’.*** So Thomas travels from doubt to belief to faith. Jesus offers him peace, and Thomas realises not only WHO Jesus but also that he is someone to trust. Jesus’ statement in verse 29 doesn’t reduce the significance of Thomas’ experience of seeing and believing but it blesses people who will believe without having the physical opportunity was available to Thomas.

It will be the testimony of Thomas, Mary Magdalene and the other disciples, that leads future followers to faith. But we shouldn’t think that later generations who *have* believed and *will* believe the written words of the Gospel account are in some way lesser disciples than Thomas and his first century friends.

I think that the trouble was that, for Thomas, the trauma of witnessing the death of Jesus overshadows everything else. Perhaps the strike of the nails and the thrust of the spear have been flashing back endlessly in his mind since Good Friday. Not surprising, then, that these horrors feature in his angry reply to the other disciples: ‘Unless I see…I will not believe’ - a refusal to disconnect from what had happened.

As someone who has witnessed horrific incidents and injuries and who still carries the effects of some of these around in my brain (thankfully well-buried most of the time), I can understand why Thomas initially reacted in the way that he did.

I also understand, for the same reasons and based upon the same personal experiences, why people who have lost loved ones in tragic and/or horrific circumstances might struggle for a long time before being reassured about God’s love and our ‘rebirth’ and the promise of eternal life. It can be all too raw and horrible and such reassurances can feel insensitive to someone suffering the effects of extreme trauma and the psychological wounds that remain. So, perhaps the joy of the other disciples strikes Thomas as a flight into manic elation – an attempt to escape reality. He can’t accept that they have seen the wounds and have been breathed on by Jesus to commission them for ministry. To him, they are encouraging each other in some self-deluding mindset that he is not prepared share.

Jesus is fully aware of Thomas’ struggle, just as he understands ours and he speaks to him directly. There are many paintings showing the moment when Thomas touches the wounds of Christ, but John’s text is actually silent about this – what we *have* is Thomas’ confession and it’s almost an early creed, ***‘My Lord and my God.’***

We are one of those future generations whose faith is based upon the scripture without having been in Thomas’ position. But actually, I don’t believe that it’s solely about the scriptural account. There is something else within me that sustains my faith and I believe it is the constant evidence of the activity of the Holy Spirit through life circumstances and through the words and actions of fellow human beings, encountered in the course of our human journey.

Look at the wonderful altruism shown in recent weeks. The kind words and selfless actions of so many people towards others more vulnerable than themselves.

Jesus shared that journey, understands our doubts and fears, our joys and sadness. But he has also defeated death for us and opened the door to eternal life with God. So our Easter joy, although necessarily a bit restrained in terms of practical celebrations and services, is well founded and like Thomas, we can all say with confidence and faith: ***“My Lord and my God”.*** Amen.