A week ago our brothers and sisters in Sri Lanka were celebrating Easter Day. A day of celebration with the worldwide church. A holy joyous feast day.

And then the bombs were detonated. Hundreds killed and injured. Christian services. Our hearts go out to them. How strange it must feel. How desolate. Fear must hang heavy in the air, in streets and neighbourhoods. Does it cast out love? And what of faith? How can people be expected to believe in the power of the resurrection at a time like that?

Our Gospel reading begins in a locked room, on the first Easter Day. The disciples have locked themselves in, consumed by fear of those who are outside, fearful of those who have killed Jesus, fearful of those who may well come back for them. Fear hangs heavy in room. Doubt is there too. Mary Magdalene has seen the risen Jesus, and has proclaimed it to the disciples. But still they lock the doors. Perhaps there is survivor guilt as well. We hear that only John the beloved disciple was present at the crucifixion. Were the others already in hiding? Peter their leader had denied Jesus three times. Thomas isn’t even there.

Doubt, fear and guilt are a heady mix. It can’t have been the best place in Jerusalem to have been that night.

But then Jesus is there in the midst of them. Locked doors are not a problem for the Risen Lord. His first words do not condemn or criticise. They forgive and bring calm. ‘Peace be with you.’ It’s still the everyday greeting in the Middle East today, Shalom in Hebrew, Salaam in Arabic. ‘Peace.’

‘Then were they glad when they saw the Lord,’ as the disciples’ fear evaporated in his presence, the guilt and doubt blown away by that one word given direct to each person there. ‘Peace – Peace be with you.’ Jesus says it a second time, and shows them his hands and his side.
This isn’t just a magical fairy tale ending. He was still their Lord who had been crucified. His risen body still bore the marks of crucifixion, the torn hands and feet, the wound of the spear in his side. The Body of Christ in Sri Lanka today bears fresh marks of sacrifice, just as the victims are held within the wounds of the risen Christ today.

And then we have the Great Commission and the Day of Pentecost all rolled into one in John’s Gospel, as Jesus breathes the gift of the Holy Spirit into the disciples and sends them out into the world; ‘As the Father has sent me, so do I send you.’ John’s gospel began with the deliberate echoing of the story of creation, ‘In the beginning was the Word’, and now Jesus breathes into his disciples, just as God in Genesis breathes into Adam. Adam is turned by that divine spirit from the dust of the earth into a fully human being, made in the image of God. The disciples are transformed from people consumed by guilt, doubt and fear into apostles who will be Christ’s body on earth, willingly facing every kind of danger in his name. They are a forgiven community, and they are called to forgive. Just as we are called to be, as part of the worldwide church, a forgiven and a forgiving community.

 Forgiveness is not cheap and it’s not automatic. But it is made possible by the all-embracing, forgiving love of God in Christ, released once and for all through his blood on the cross. That’s what we remember each week at the Eucharist, that’s the loving power we receive each week from the altar, as we are challenged to become what we are, the Body of Christ.

But what about Thomas? He’d missed all this. The joy of the disciples left him cold and feeling shut out. ‘Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my hand in his side, I will not believe.’

Most Christians go through cycles of faith and doubt. There are times when God feels so real and other times when it all seems just so many words or even make believe. When, like the Magi in Eliot’s poem we hear ‘voices ringing in our ears that, this is all folly.’ In those moments, St Thomas really is the Saint for us. Because that’s just how he was feeling.

I’ve been ordained over 30 years and I still have times like that. Clergy are expected to be brim full of faith and optimism at all times, leading the church forward. But clergy are human, and faith and doubt are intertwined, and need to be if we are to be open to
truth, to new insights into a God who is always bigger than our hearts and minds can hold.

Some years ago I was in a big service and God felt absent. I’d been feeling low, under stress in the parish. Rather burned out in my ministry, with God far away. What was the point of all this religion? How could I go on worshipping an invisible God and leading others to do the same?

And then I walked down the aisle to read the gospel. Candles on either side, cross ahead of me, congregation all around. And this was the passage. Thomas saying that ‘Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my hand in his side, I will not believe.’

At that moment I knew that was me. Surrounded by a sea of faces it was as though Jesus himself was in front of me, not just the gospel book. I was choked up, and at first could hardly speak the words of our Lord.

‘Peace be with you.’ ‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.’

I find that sometimes, when doubt is at its strongest, God finds his own way through to my heart and soul. His own way through to my distracted self to say, ‘Peace be with you.’

So this story of Thomas is precious to me. According to tradition Thomas travelled on the spice route to South West India, to found churches more ancient than any in England, and Christian communities that are there to this day in South India and Sri Lanka.

And the Risen Lord says to them still,

Peace be with you! ‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.’