

# **Remembrance Sunday**

## **John 20:24-31**

One of the great challenges which a newly ordained minister has to come to terms with, and continually live with, is coping with funerals. They are a necessary part of the vocation. Their occurrence is unpredictable and so they can't be planned for. Who knows how many funerals will come, in any one particular week? Will the minister be burying a stranger, a parishioner, an acquaintance or a good friend? There is much work that needs to be done in visiting

and preparation as well as managing the pressures of the service itself and any required follow-up. How foolish the minister who does not pause to reflect on the impact of this work because it has the potential to bring emotional and spiritual challenges that can enrich a ministry or destroy it.

I have visited the cemetery in Lossiemouth about two hundred times in the past five years. I have watched it steadily expand and I often reflect that as more and more land is claimed for sacred use so more lives are impacted by the blow of loss and the journey of mourning.

I remember recently conducting a graveside committal and at the conclusion of the short service the people began to disperse. A gentleman caught my eye as he walked away. He paused, changed direction and walked up to a gravestone. He reached out his hand and he touched it. He kept his hand there. He was lost in private thoughts. I don't know what he was thinking but for me as an observer of this quiet moment; I could almost feel for myself the tangible, heart felt need to hope. If collective memory and affection could bring our loved ones

back we would not let go of the gravestones...

Would we?

Why do we gather today with collective memories, some generations old, some held by those who saw with their own eyes? Is it that our friends and loved ones, might somehow, overcome? For some of us, yes, for others, no. But together, today, we remember.

Thomas, in the Gospel reading, remembered that Jesus, the teacher he had followed had been crucified. He remembered that he was dead and so he knew that claims from his friends that Jesus had been seen walking

about in recent days were absolute nonsense. This kind of talk was going to do no-one any good and so he made the bold, confident claim that unless he could reach out and touch him he would not believe.

There is a special peace and tranquility in Lossiemouth cemetery. The shelter of the trees which wrap around the perimeter of the graves creates a very different atmosphere to my experience on the Isle of Skye where all the cemeteries are either located at the end of windswept and rain lashed headlands or are found at the top of cliffs - land that was of no use for practically anything else. But

Lossie is different. Here is a place where someone can spend a private hour walking around and taking in; reaching out and touching.

Among the graves tended by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission are eight containing the remains of German airmen. The graves are immaculate; tended with care and respect exactly as the graves of the allied servicemen located nearby. There is no distinction made between our men and our former enemy. Instead there is a recognition of a shared humanity, a shared

dignity and sacredness of life, a shared grief in the tragic, wasteful results of war.

Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, the great German baritone singer, lived with the pain of what the Nazi regime had done to his brother, Martin, who had both physical and intellectual disabilities, falling victim to the Nazi euthanasia programme. Dietrich himself was conscripted in 1943, sent to the Russian front, and spent two years in an American prison camp. Later, he reflected: 'Nobody today can really imagine what the war was like. Even I can't. I was forced to experience the war in full, and it was not worth

remembering. It is a human trait to suppress negative memories. What remains are a couple of friendships, or a particular human encounter – and that’s a lot.

‘At the same time, we must not forget. Most importantly, we must not forget our guilt. Whether the guilt is carried by those now living or earlier generations plays no role. The responsibility should be inherited, and with it, the sense of that for which one should have been responsible. It is difficult to deal with, but it is essential that people think about it.’<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.classical-music.com/article/dietrich-fischer-dieskau>



Jesus came to share our humanity. We can only remain faithful to him if we prize the dignity and worth of every human being, especially those whom we are, or were, in conflict with. Mary Magdalene attended Jesus' tomb with the intention of paying her respects. She was preparing to reach out her hands and touch the tomb but he was not there. We don't know the reality of what Mary Magdalene was able to experience now. The tomb stones to our loved ones still stand, cold and silent, bearing witness to our loss. We are inclined to side with Thomas. How can we hope to believe beyond what we

see with our eyes? Yet, our outstretched hands are hoping to believe beyond the grave that the figure who stood before Thomas was not merely the human Jesus who Thomas knew well, but was in fact his Lord and his God, our Lord and our God.

We will shortly remember together in silence. In that silence there is a weight of memory that is impossible to bear. We hope that we can manage, but ultimately we know that our tendency to choose war over peace condemns us. The guilt of which Fischer-Dieskau spoke is a shared human guilt. We are in need of God's intervention and today

we are able to bear witness to it if we are able to receive the blessing of Christ: “blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

Amen.