Alleluia! Christ is risen.
He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

17 March feels like a long way away now. It was a Tuesday. The first wave of social distancing measures had been in place for some little while, you might remember we were discouraged from going to pubs and restaurants, and a good number of sporting events had already been cancelled. We were receiving the sacrament in one kind only at church, with only the presiding priest receiving the chalice. But we could all sense that more was coming. The cases of coronavirus were rising fast, as were the number of deaths. I got up that morning, Tuesday morning, which was the feast of Saint Patrick, patron saint of Ireland. I took myself to church, to a church that I attend fairly regularly which has midweek communion services three days a week. I had a feeling that our churchgoing was about to change quite dramatically. In fact when I got to the church only the vicar and I had turned up for the service, and we had a conversation before Mass began. He, too, sensed that there might be an announcement in the next day or so about our public worship. The two of us, together, in the Lady Chapel, celebrated the Eucharist for Saint Patrick. At lunchtime that day the announcement came from the archbishops that all public worship in Church of England parishes was suspended until further notice. I had attended the last public act of worship in the Church of England that I would go to until, I’m guessing, Sunday, 15 March. You have had to learn, very quickly, about the doctrine of spiritual communion, which is itself a difficult, unfamiliar and complicated doctrine. And as the Book of Common Prayer makes quite clear, it is a workaround, it is there, effectively, for emergency situations like the one in which we are in. You have been starving from the sacrament. And actually, although the experience has been quite different for me, and for my fellow priests who have retained the privilege of celebrating Holy Communion, the experience is also pretty priority, with of course appropriate, careful and stringent social distancing measures. As some of you know as someone classed as extremely vulnerable I know that I am not allowed outside my house until 17 June, and so I will certainly not attend another public act of worship until then.

And to be honest the last three or four weeks have been a bit of a scramble for the Church of England. With Holy Week and Easter looming, clergy have been cashing in their theological qualifications in favour of social media expertise and knowledge of how to make Zoom talk to YouTube!

But we are through Holy Week, and we are now settling into this wonderful season of Eastertide, which stretches away into the closing days of May. And we do need to talk about our experience.

Because actually the situation we are in is deeply deficient. Yes, it is wonderful that we have been able to work out ways of worshipping together. Yes, we are learning things that probably we would not have learned otherwise. Yes, our prayer lives have actually, in a funny way, been revived in some cases.

But nonetheless this is not ideal. Some of you, most of you worshipping with us this morning, have not received, physically, the bread and the wine of Holy Communion since, I’m guessing, Sunday, 15 March. You have had to learn, very quickly, about the doctrine of spiritual communion, which is itself a difficult, unfamiliar and complicated doctrine. And as the Book of Common Prayer makes quite clear, it is a workaround, it is there, effectively, for emergency situations like the one in which we are in. You have been starving from the sacrament. And actually, although the experience has been quite different for me, and for my fellow priests who have retained the privilege of celebrating Holy Communion, the experience is also pretty
deficient. I am astonishingly lucky to have a kind, generous and holy wife who has been willing to answer the service for me over and over again in the past few weeks, but that is not how it is supposed to be. The prayer book is clear that there should be several people, a congregation. And actually it is also not healthy for a priest to only receive the sacrament from his or her own hands. I haven’t received the sacrament from another priest’s hands since 17 March, and by the time I emerge from my isolation it will have been three months, a quarter of the year.

I think it is quite important for us to, now that we are past Holy Week, start thinking together about how we will learn from this experience, or perhaps relearn, remember, some of the things that we believe about God, and the church, and particularly the Church of England with which those of us watching, and worshipping, this feed this morning identifying one way or another.

And our readings offer us a way into that. Perhaps particularly our gospel reading. We know it well, it is always set for today, the second Sunday of Eastertide, known as Low Sunday. And it speaks precisely into our current situation, where we are wrestling with, on the one hand the physical things of our own existence as embodied, geographically located human beings, and on the other hand the extraordinary and transcendent God whom we love, and worship, and seek to follow.

Normally on this day one would preach a sermon about doubting Thomas. And given that he is my name Saint, I tend to preach sermons trying to redeem him from that nickname, and pointing out the extraordinary statement of faith that, finally, Thomas utters.

But today instead I want to point to the tension in the gospel reading. Here are a group of people - this is Easter evening don’t forget - just hours after the resurrection, and the disciples are in a house, locked in, behind closed doors (sound familiar?) and afraid. And is it any surprise at all that St Thomas, who appears to have either forgotten the appointment, misread his diary, or got delayed in the supermarket, wants some physical evidence of what is happened. ‘Ground me’, he asks. ‘Give me something with which to orient myself. Let me see the nail marks. Let me hold on to Christ. Give me something tangible that will help me to know where I am.’

And Thomas has to wait a week. It’s a week later, today as it were, that the evidence he’s looking for, the physicality, is provided. And then of course, comes that extraordinarily profound statement of faith: “my Lord and my God.”

And you know ever since, as men and women and children, as communities and congregations have sought to follow God together, we too have found that the physical is enormously helpful. It’s why we build church buildings. It’s why we make them beautiful. It’s why, traditionally, the most ornate and gorgeous churches tended to be located in the poorest areas of our towns, because we are physical people, we are, this side of the resurrection, and almost certainly the other side as well if we read St Paul carefully, a combination of body, mind, spirit which is what makes us who we are. We are physical people as well as emotional, spiritual, psychological. Beauty is helpful. Space set aside for worship is helpful. Of course we can pray anywhere. Of course we can worship anywhere. The last month or so has shown us that. But it is not wrong that it hurts. It is not wrong that we long for our buildings, that we long for the beauty of holiness. The Church of England has always known that: that places and communities and societies matter. It’s why we are still a parish church. Why we have a group of people who
belong to a vicar, and a building. It doesn’t mean no one else is welcome: and after all I am 86 miles away from the parish this morning! But there’s a thing about belonging here, and I guess all I’m saying this morning is that it’s okay that that hurts. Several people have had conversations with me over the last couple of weeks about spiritual communion, and saying how painful it is not to be able to share in bread and wine. Why can’t a priest consecrate over Facebook? Why can’t we have our own bread and wine in front of us? Well there are a lot of answers to that, and not enough time now. But the Church of England has always maintained that there is something important about physicality. It matters that the bread and the wine are physical things, placed on one physical table, and then shared. And we can’t do that the moment, and it is painful. And it ought to be.

But you know Christ comes to us in the midst of this. Christ doesn’t give doubting Thomas a theological lecture about being able to see past the physical. No, what does he say? Reach out your hand. Put your finger here. Thomas, I know where you are, and what you need. Touch, feel, and recognise me. And because we are human, we have carried on using the physical: bread, wine, water, the sacraments of the church, not because they matter for their own sake, but because they point beyond, and they point towards the God who has prepared a place for us where we will be with him face-to-face. And that will be physical too. Read one Corinthians.

I don’t how long this is going to last. But if you can, as I hold up the bread and the wine at the altar this morning, don’t look away. Because what’s happening is God is reminding you, reminding us, of a promise. The promise that although physical things help us wrap our heads around the truth, the truth is still true anyway. God is already with you. God is already closer to you than your own heartbeat. God, in the resurrection, has lifted up our entire world, physical, mental, psychological, spiritual, and is preparing us, even now, for the life of the world to come. Alleluia! Christ is risen.