

Holy Week and Easter
St Mary's Cathedral, Glasgow
Sunday 19th April 2020
Dr. Deborah Lewer on Ernst Barlach's *The Reunion*,
Mahogany, 1926
Ernst Barlach Haus, Hamburg

REUNION

1

Welcome to the last of three podcasts for Holy Week and Easter from St Mary's Cathedral in Glasgow. My name's Debbie Lewer. I'm an art historian at the University of Glasgow, and a member of the congregation at St Mary's.

This Easter, when most of us cannot see our friends, in the flesh, I want to look at a modest little sculpture, carved from a block of mahogany in Germany in 1926. It's by the Expressionist artist and writer Ernst Barlach, and it's called *The Reunion*. It is a meeting, an embrace and a resurrection.

2

Christ stands, straight and firm. The falling drapery of his robe emphasizes his upright body. This body is no apparition. The encounter is with Thomas. He is the disciple we know best for his struggle to believe without proof. Until this moment, Thomas has needed to see, to touch the wounded body of the man he only knows is dead. Without the meeting we see here, he would be left isolated from the joy his friends can share. Barlach approaches the scene with great economy and a deep sense for expressive form. His version of this meeting between the risen Jesus and the stumbling Thomas is unusual in the history of art. Most artists, naturally enough, want to show us the proof too. The open wounds that the risen Christ miraculously displays, the drama of the extraordinary. So, in art,

Thomas most often stretches out a probing finger, staring in amazement at the wound offered to his incredulity. But with this solid little sculpture, Barlach shows us something else. He shows us less, and more. Look at Thomas. There is no probing. Here, for him, the decisive moment is the embrace. It is being held. Being upheld *by* those wounded hands. Brought face to face.

Thomas's knees look like they're giving way. Perhaps he is weary, from the loss he's been grieving or from his struggle with doubt. Or perhaps he has knelt and is raised now, too, to the level of the friend. Or maybe his own stiff, uncomprehending logic has finally buckled, and released him. Whatever we see in this work, the reunion brings a new way to believe.

3

Some works of art imagine the *moment* of Resurrection – with Christ stepping victoriously, dazzlingly, from the tomb. But like the gospels, artists also show us what was decisive. What set ordinary people on the way of a whole new movement. It was the reunions. Seeing each other again. In a garden. In the sharing of bread, sitting together. On a beach, over a cooked fish breakfast. And, in a room, with a disciple who was in need. Whose need was to see again, to touch, to believe. And whose need Jesus met.

4

Barlach struggled with the idea of God all his life, thinking and writing extensively about it. He refused to believe without question. As the First World War was raging, he once wrote, in his diary, "If I could bear to believe that the Almighty Spirit is ever-present and all-pervading, I should have to arrange my life differently." Perhaps Barlach could relate to Thomas, and to why Thomas falters, and staggers, at God's presence.

The original German title of this work is *Das Wiedersehen*. Literally, it means the seeing-again. Germans say goodbye, by saying 'Auf

Wiedersehen'. To when we see again. We have many reunions to look forward to. Many will be ordinary. Some might be extraordinary. Either way, perhaps, seeing again, we can be transformed too.