

The Worth of Doubters: Sermon Preached at St John's, Devizes, Sunday 24th April 2022 (Second Sunday of Easter)

Readings – Acts 5: 27–32; John 20: 19–31

“Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”

I wonder when you last heard a friend or an acquaintance described as “a bit of a Doubting Thomas?” Perhaps you have even been described as a “Doubting Thomas” yourself. It isn't usually intended as a positive assessment. A Doubting Thomas, including the original in today's Gospel reading can often be presented as a cynic who is committed to nothing.

Yet ‘uncommitted’ isn't the picture of Thomas we get from other passages in John's Gospel. To shed light on this and some other things in this morning's Gospel reading, we need to jump back to the 11th chapter of John. As I don't expect you to remember what happens in every bit of the Bible by chapter number, let me reassure you that this is a passage of scripture familiar to most of you: it's the story of the raising of Lazarus. One significant thing about it is that it's the last miracle and indeed last major “action scene” in John's Gospel before Jesus' final entry into Jerusalem.

Back then, when Jesus' life was under threat by stone-throwing mobs, Thomas was the one who responded to His suggestion of a trip into deeply hostile Judaea by telling his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” Here we see not an uncommitted backslider but a deeply loyal follower of Christ; perhaps even a fanatic.

For all that commitment, can we blame Thomas for being sceptical, faced with tales from his friends that Jesus had returned from the dead, walking through walls to appear in the middle of locked rooms? We have all experienced people reacting to shocking news, especially to the death of a loved one, with denial. Indeed, I have found myself engaging in denial at times, and I suspect most of you have done so too. It's a natural human tendency; so personally I have more than a little fellow-feeling with Thomas in this passage when he is wary of his companions engaging in denial.

The Church needs its Thomases, because it needs Christians of all sorts of temperaments and outlooks. It needs its sceptics as well as its enthusiasts, its pragmatists as well as its romantics. And that means that the Church needs all of you, just as you are, otherwise God would not have called you to be here this morning.

Having tried to restore the reputation of Thomas, let me now turn to this strange risen Christ who appears in the midst of the disciples despite the doors being locked. Again, John 11 sheds important light on this morning's passage. Back then, Jesus delayed his arrival to the tomb of Lazarus until the fourth day after his death; Jewish tradition held that the soul left the body on the third day after death. So something significant has even before Jesus' death already been telegraphed to us in John's Gospel; indeed, it is so important that we are told that Lazarus' body had begun to smell when Jesus arrived. As so often, the King James Version gets this across most vividly, stating that "*Martha, the sister of him that was dead, saith unto him, Lord, by this time he stinketh.*"

This is all to signal that Jesus' powers are not merely those of a healer, but restore to new life souls that had passed out of mortal life entirely, bringing them out from the realms of death itself.

So, when Thomas faces the risen Christ, St John has already made it very clear that this is not just the mortal Christ resuscitated, but someone born to an entirely new state of life, truly human but also not bound by conventional material limits. That's one side of the equation; the other side of it is that when Thomas pokes Christ's wounds that makes it clear that this wasn't a ghost or a disembodied spirit, but the real, actual, Jesus Christ who had just been executed in the most brutal fashion.

This is strange stuff; paradoxical stuff. The risen Christ is really the same Jesus who once turned water into wine and once drove the money-changers out of the Temple; yet He has also become something different.

Let me apologise now to those of you who read my sermons on the Internet, because I'm now going to repeat a point I made at Potterne on Easter Day. Then I preached about Luke's Resurrection account, while this morning I'm preaching

about John's, but the same implication is strongly present in both, in the Jesus who appears in a locked room.

Some of you may remember the Bishop of Durham back in the 1980s, David Jenkins, causing a bit of a flap by saying the Resurrection was "no mere conjuring trick with bones". This was interpreted by the press to mean that the bishop thought the Resurrection wasn't real. That wasn't what Jenkins was saying at all, although I have to say as someone who used to be a bishop's press officer that, for all his many virtues, Jenkins was his own worst enemy in dealing with the press.

Yet, in substance, Jenkins was absolutely right. The Resurrection is no "mere conjuring trick with bones". It is something far greater than that. Heaven also isn't simply an endless perfect day on earth, but a reality that is different, greater, than the one we experience in our physical bodies. In heaven we will be the human beings that God has created us to be, as individual and unique as all of us are, and yet also in harmony with one another, with God, and with the whole created order, in a way that simply cannot be in this world. Here death and sin have power over us; in heaven we will be liberated from them for eternity.

We can no more comprehend it than a caterpillar could understand what it means to fly through the air as a butterfly. Yet that is what caterpillars are designed to do – to be transformed into something that can move in new dimensions. So our human bodies are wonderful and glorious things, beautiful creations of God – but also only part of what we are designed to be. That will only be revealed after our mortal death, when we are raised to eternal life.

Accepting all this involves a real leap of faith. Far from deriding Thomas, this morning's Gospel reading explicitly acknowledges how hard it is to hold faith of this magnitude: not only is Thomas appropriately sceptical, but those "who have not seen **and yet** have come to believe" are considered by Christ to be blessed. That's us – we have not seen **and yet** have come to believe.

We are surrounded by people who think that Christian claims about Jesus Christ are old-fashioned and probably have been disproved by science or something like that. But the Resurrection was a difficult thing to accept in the

ancient world also – we know, for example, that the Sadducees, a Jewish denomination we hear mentioned in the Gospels, rejected the concept entirely.

And some of you may doubt my claims that eternal life awaits us, perhaps rejecting as over-simplistic my analogy with caterpillars and butterflies. I don't think that's unreasonable. As I said, the Church needs its sceptics and pragmatists as much as hoary old romantics like me and all the rest of us. Just remember to apply the same reasonable scepticism to other institutions, organisations, and worldviews. In particular, apply it to those who claim to be defenders of reason against superstition, and therefore to reject God entirely, for they have their own agendas and biases; I've yet to encounter a coherent set of atheistic beliefs that doesn't involve metaphysical leaps of faith at least as profound those involved in accepting the Resurrection.

And in that light, perhaps consider whether it is time to metaphysically poke your fingers in Christ's wounds, to make a leap of faith, to come to believe and thus be blessed.

And now to God be the glory, the Father the creator of all life, the Son the restorer to new life, the Spirit who breathes in all life, now and forever, as is most justly his due. Amen.