

Unless...

Acts 4:32-35; John 20:19-31

One of the often-used phrases at the General Assembly, which is just over a month away and will again, sadly, only be online, is the phrase, "Questions are always in order." Given that Presbyterians are fond of doing things decently and in order, it always introduced an element of risk and uncertainty into proceedings. One never knew what was going to bounce off the floor. Worse, if you were a convener or an Assembly Committee, or Moderator, there was always that nagging fear that you might not have the answer at your fingertips.

I think of that phrase, having 'the answer at your fingertips' comes close to summing up the experience of Thomas. If ever there was a saint for these doubting, uncertain, questioning times, Thomas is our man. Thomas, one of the twelve disciples. He missed, for whatever reason, the first resurrection appearances of Jesus. He had not been in the upper room. He wasn't the only doubter. Mary Magdalen, at the tomb, also doubted, until she met the risen Jesus. The rest of the disciples, confronted by the stories of the women, were equally sceptical. Locked away in their upper room, the disciples refused to believe Mary because they had not seen for themselves. Thomas was in good company.

Only when Jesus came at last, into that room of doubt, did the disciples, one by one, and some days later, Thomas himself, come to believe. But not before he had said, "Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in His side, I will not believe." For Thomas, and for all the rest of us who have followed since, who were not in the garden, who were not in the upper room, who were not on the road to Emmaus, who were not on the shore side, there was room for doubt. We do not have all the answers at our finger tips.

"Unless..."

"Of all the characters Jesus meets in the post-resurrection world of John's Gospel, none has left a stronger mark on the imagination of Western Christianity than Thomas. We love him. He is the incredulous non-believer who hides inside every believing Christian – the questioner in us that

resist easy answer to hard questions of faith, who always wants a little more proof.”ⁱ “Unless...” We’ve all been there, in our life of faith, and of doubt. Maybe we are there today.

Of course, these resurrection stories are not about Thomas, important though he is, they are about Jesus. The gospel story doesn’t show Jesus opening the door, walking right up to Thomas and starting to argue with him by trying to answer his rationalist questions or assuaging his empirical worries. Rather, John tells us that Jesus, no explanation given, walks through a closed, locked door (is it simply a metaphor for the often closed, locked minds people have?) to get to Thomas. Thomas’ doubt doesn’t drive this story in this encounter with Jesus. It is Jesus Who is determined to reach this stalwart sceptic, whom no one else seems able to convince. It is Jesus Who refuses to let dead bolts or chains block the movement of love toward the one who has questions.

“Unless...” says Thomas. “Peace with with you” says Jesus. Again. And, ‘Touch Me, handle Me.’ And, “Do not be faithless, but believing.”

When doubt crowds out hope, we can be confident that Jesus will come to meet us where we are, even if it is out on the far edge of faith that has forgotten how to believe. What a strange thing to hold on to – this certainty that answer to our most profound and desperate questions about life come not because we seek them with focused determination but because God comes seeking us, stepping through the walls that hardship, and fear, and life’s bitterest experiences build around us, offering love at the very moment that faith seems nothing but a ‘farical ghost story told by not-to-be-believed friends’.ⁱⁱ

Thomas doesn’t run a mile as Jesus walks right up to him. Jesus offers Thomas ‘peace’, and then asks His doubting, questioning friend to put his doubtful, questioning fingers into the wounds that destroyed His body only days before.

When God comes, we will recognise God’s presences in those moments when peace is offered, in those moments when life may have been brutal, violent, and terrible, and is honestly acknowledged. When we find that at such moments we are not lost and alone, but have been found, again, by a God Who welcomes our questions, is unafraid of our doubt, and shows us that it is possible to believe nevertheless.

For Thomas, the resurrection did not airbrush the wounds of Jesus, or whitewash the suffering of Jesus and bathe everything in a golden glow of sentimental fuzziness. Jesus meets Thomas head on, and responds to his, 'Unless...' with, "Here I am, wounds and all. Touch if you need to, but believe, as I invite you to do." And Thomas, without touching, recognises that Jesus is alive. "My Lord, and my God!"

Look for Jesus in the hurts and the wounds and the questions of our world today, for there you will find people working hard to try to make things better. Look for Jesus on the Covid wards, and in the charities and providers of help, and the everyday invisible people who get up each morning and go out into the world to play their little part in making this place better. Look for Jesus in the people whose life and whose work has been about building bridges, where divides had been before. And asking 'why' questions about situations which people thought hopeless, or unchangeable. Unless we go to those places, and unless we meet those people, then we may well be hard-pressed to find Jesus today. Of course, He is in the beauty of the earth, and the wonder of the universe, and the mystery of science, and the transcendence of the arts. But for Thomas, and maybe for us, Jesus is also in those scarred and fractured places in society where help is hard at work, or needs to be.

The weekend has been dominated by the death of Philip, Duke of Edinburgh. I was privileged to meet him on a number of occasions and as I prepared for this sermon about Thomas, and his questions, I thought the Duke was fashioned in a similar mould. Not shy of asking hard questions, and not to be fobbed off with platitudes, I remember on one occasion over afternoon tea his opening gambit to me was, "Now then Moderator, what do you think about euthanasia?" "It depends who it's for." Was my answer. Which made him laugh, and an hour long conversation followed with the poor Queen trying to drop hints in the end that it must be time to dress for dinner. Or when, after a sermon about bridges, and the pending blessing of the Queensferry Crossing, he said: "You're terribly brave. I mean, what if the bridge falls down? Didn't somebody bless the Titanic at some point?" "Well, yes, sir. But clearly someone forgot to bless the iceberg."

Doubts and questions shouldn't make you hold back and hide, they should make you step forward and ask. Like the Duke. Like Thomas. With their faith seeking understanding.

“Unless” can be said in such a way that it sounds like a key locking a door, the door to our minds, the door to our lives. But ‘unless’ can also be said in such a way that it sounds like someone opening the door, and bravely, uncertainly, hopefully wondering what lies beyond the door, and willing to step forward. Perhaps finding that as the door opens, Jesus Himself is stepping forward to greet you with the words “Peace”, and “Believe.”

I finish with a poem by A E Housman, Easter Hymn, about Jesus, which also invites us to step forward, questioning, and wondering:

*If in that Syrian garden, ages slain,
You sleep, and know not you are dead in vain,
Nor even in dreams behold how dark and bright
Ascends in smoke and fire by day and night
The hate you died to quench and could but fan,
Sleep well and see no morning, son of man.*

*But if, the grave rent and the stone rolled by,
At the right hand of majesty on high
You sit, and sitting so remember yet
Your tears, your agony and bloody sweat,
Your cross and passion and the life you gave,
Bow hither out of heaven and see and save.*

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Serene Jones, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 2, p400

ⁱⁱ Ibid p402