

Faith and Doubt

John 20:19-31; Acts 2:14a, 22-32

"One of the greatest gifts children give us is the ability to see the world through fresh eyes. Everyday wonders we have long since taken for granted become fresh and new again. A dandelion is no longer a weed, it is a cluster of fairies we can send dancing on a breeze with one quick puff. (Or a nature's clock by which we can tell the time). A crack in the (pavement) is not a nuisance plotting to trip us: it is a whole world waiting to be discovered. (Or if we stand on it we might be pursued by bears). The gentle lick of a puppy's tongue on our cheek is not disgusting; it is cause for giggles of delight. The wonder and joy of every experience is not diminished by repetition, as many parents (and grandparents and godfathers) are reminded when their child utters the words, 'read it again' for the hundredth time.

Unfortunately, as we grow up we lose that sense of wonder and awe. Even our faith is at risk of becoming (prosaic rather than a springboard of imagination)...Every time we hear the good news of Jesus Christ, it is (a new beginning) all over again.ⁱ The question really ought to be not, "Does God exist?" but rather, "How am I changed by all of the ideas that come to mind when I say the name, 'God', and what are the positive questions seeking truth and understanding that my sense of God evokes?"

The resurrection of Jesus is the foundation of our Christian faith. Whatever we make of it, however we wrestle with what it was, what it was not, and what it might be, all Christians are challenged to wonder about, question, and hope after the impact of that story, which is still ongoing.

"The human mind searches for order: to make sense of things, to understand the world, to organize all the data that comes to our awareness. This is the impulse that pushes us toward

scientific discovery. It is at the core of legal (argument) and forensic debate. It is the reason we love mystery stories. We possess the keen desire to follow the evidence until the mystery is solved."ⁱⁱ

I sense a little of this with Thomas, and who can blame him? We are not told why Thomas missed the first resurrection appearance. After the unimaginable emotional stresses of being around Jesus in Holy Week, the tidal waves of possibilities, disasters, triumphs and failures; the perplexity of Jesus' teaching, and foot-washing, and bread and wine sharing; falling asleep at Gethsemane and running for his life; seeing his friend subjected to a brutal and humiliating execution; the grief and the guilt of the dead Saturday; now this story of resurrection.

Where had Thomas been? Getting supplies for those in that upper room? Gathering news? Looking in on others. Taking a break from his overanxious friends? Unlike them, he had not stayed hidden in the upper room into which they had fearfully locked themselves.

His world turned upside down, Thomas wanted sure ground to put his feet upon before he could make up his mind about whether Jesus was dead or alive. He resists the implications of this far-fetched good news and its implications.ⁱⁱⁱ

Thomas could be considered the patron saint of the modern world. Take him seriously. We don't preach from above him but from beside him. He doesn't give himself over to the religious enthusiasm of others. He won't surrender his mind to someone else's second hand experiences so long as there is an opportunity for him to experience them for himself.

The unhelpful moniker 'Doubting Thomas' has hung around for too long. The consistent portrayal of Thomas in John's Gospel is of a solid realist, and a brave one at that. When Lazarus died and Jesus headed out to raise him, a mission that will end in his own death, Thomas follows on, prepared to die with Jesus if needs be. When Jesus, on the verge of crucifixion, tells His disciples

that they know where He's going, it's Thomas who is straightforward enough to respond: 'no, we don't.' You're left with a sense that here is a man who is willing to name the evident and difficult facts.^{iv}

This Sunday after Easter should still be a joyous continuation of last week. But the numbers aren't the same. The extra floral decorations have gone, the fanfares of the trumpet are echoes now. On what some churches call Low Sunday it can feel like turning up to a party after most of the guests have left and those who remain report what a magnificent time you missed by coming too late.

Mary Magdalene and her five-word sermon, the first ever preached: "I have seen the Lord."

Thomas: "Oh, really?"

The other disciples with the second five-word sermon: "We have seen the Lord." Thomas: "Oh, really?"

We're right there with Thomas at that point. We missed those first Easter resurrection appearance too. Not just by a few hours, but by a couple of thousand years. We've never lived at any other time other than after Easter. For most of us every Sunday is more like the Sunday after Easter. We can hear the accounts, but we were not really there. We did not see and touch and experience it for ourselves.

Poor Thomas gets the moniker, Doubter, but Mary Magdalene was the same. She saw the empty tomb but didn't believe until the risen Christ appeared before her and addressed her by name. For the other disciples, excepting Thomas, they doubted Mary, and locked themselves away in a dark room to hide. It was not until out of some dark corner on that first Easter night that they saw and believed. He showed them His hands and His side, His wounds, and they believed. Doubting was the common thread amongst all of those earliest of Christians. The 21st century doesn't have a monopoly on doubt.

How does Jesus respond? Not with impatience and frustration, not even with scepticism about everyone needing something more after all that Jesus had been and said and taught and done. He said, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, but believe." In other words, 'You need something more than a second-hand encounter with Me? You want to see for yourself? I do not condemn you. Touch. See. Believe.'^v

We don't read that Thomas did reach out and touch, but we are told what Thomas said, "My Lord and my God!" It's one of the strongest declarations of faith in the whole of the New Testament. Then Jesus blessed Thomas. Just as Jesus blessed every single one who had not seen Him, but still have come to belief. Over two thousand years' worth of people. You, and me. To each one of us, in the ways that we need, if we will let Him, Jesus meets us and gives us enough, just enough, for us to believe. Jesus is in the business of meeting people where they are. No one size fits all with Him. He'll meet, He'll show wounds, if that's what we need, in the world and the church today. He'll speak words that warm our hearts. He'll introduce us to people who get on with doing the things that they can do to help where they can and do so because they have come to believe, and inspire us.

He'll show us in pictures and paintings and beautiful buildings. He'll speak to us through music and literature, and the voices of children. He'll surprise people in tree decorations outside this church. He'll engage people through the conversations in these seats just a week ago, where regular members chatted to occasional visitors, and spoke with kindness and encouragement and welcome.

In the ages-long debate over faith and doubt, perhaps particularly in this secular age, people are waiting to see the marks of Jesus. If no longer in the living person of Jesus Christ, then in the living body of the Church of Jesus Christ, where people still make big sacrifices and small sacrifices to

show what faith can do. For all that we hear of the sophistication of modern people, they are much more willing to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead when they see the difference that it makes to ordinary people like you and me. We do things: duties, car rotas, choirs, creche, Sunday Club, coffee mornings, meetings, talks, charity support, fund-raising, and every single thing that goes on in this church because somewhere, somehow, the experience of Jesus has lodged in our hearts and minds, and we are moved to be and to do something.

In this time of faith and doubt, what people are looking for, at the heart of things, is some authentic sign in fellow human beings that Jesus means something to us and motivates us to be different. And maybe, somehow, inspire and motivate them.

Faith is nothing without doubt. Belief is nothing without asking questions. But it doesn't end with doubt and questions. We don't get all the answers, we get some. We don't get all the understanding, but we get enough. It will lead us, if we are willing, to say with Thomas, 'My Lord, and my God!'

May it be so with all of you today.

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

Amen

ⁱ Kathleen Long Bostrom, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol 2, p380

ⁱⁱ Clayton J Schmit, *ibid*, p395

ⁱⁱⁱ E Elizabeth Johnson, *Feasting on the Gospels*, John Vol 2, p326

^{iv} Paul Simpson Duke, *ibid*, pps 327, 329

^v Martin B Copenhaver, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol 2, p396