

SERMON for Easter 2 – April 16th, 2023.

Readings: Acts 2: 14a, 22-31; Psalm 16; 1 Peter 1: 1-12; John 20: 19-31.

There is a story:

The scene is “a downtown church where they run a drop-in centre for street people. Some of them were in the back row, rather hung over, maybe even quite drunk. Well, the gospel for that day was about Jesus walking on the water, and one of them stood up and said, very loudly, 'Are we supposed to believe that?'

The preacher was quite upset. But on the way out of church after the service, one of the grey-haired elders of the church caught his attention, cocked his head in the direction of the drunk and said, 'Listen to him. He's the only one honest enough to ask the questions.'¹

I used to dread today's gospel reading coming up. You see my maiden name was Thomas, and way back in Primary School I had a very unkind Scripture teacher, who always used to make a big deal about Thomas and how he questioned the reality of the resurrection. He always used to make a point of singling me out when this story was told, shaming and embarrassing me, as if somehow, I was responsible for Thomas' lack of faith. A bit rough on a shy 8-year-old!

Our three main readings today deal, one way or another, with the question of the resurrection.

In the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we hear part of Peter's Pentecost speech to the people in Jerusalem. At this point of his speech, he quotes King David as witness to the prophecy that the Messiah would not be “abandoned to Hades nor his flesh experience corruption”. God, therefore raised Jesus from the dead and, he claims, that all the disciples, the followers of Jesus, were witnesses to that fact. [Acts 2: 32].

In the Epistle, we hear from the first of Peter's letters:

By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead [1 Peter 1: 3b].

'New birth into a living hope through the resurrection' At one level, that is what happens to us at our baptism – we die to our sins and rise, in the new life of the risen Lord.

Peter then goes on to argue:

Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. [1 Peter 1: 8-9]

This links us nicely into today's gospel reading and Thomas.

“Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him

Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." [John 20: 29]

In recent years I have come to appreciate Thomas more (plus having got married and changed my surname, the connection isn't so obvious!). In some way, I think Thomas would have made a good Anglican!

One e-friend commenting on this passage suggests that “Thomas needed a better publicity agent! The title "doubting" really applied to him no more than any of the other disciples. Everyone doubted the resurrection stories. None of the disciples believed the women until they had seen the risen Christ - which was no more proof than Thomas needed. Although he stated that he needed to touch Christ's wounds before he could believe, there is no record that he actually did so when he met the risen Christ. If anything, it could be argued that Thomas was less fearful and sceptical than the others. While everyone else was locked away in the “Upper Room”, Thomas was out and about doing what, we don't know.

If you want a real case of resurrection scepticism, that puts Thomas' doubting in perspective, take a look at Matthew 28: 17. The scene is the Great Commissioning as the resurrected Christ sends his remaining eleven disciples out into all the world: "When they saw him, they worshipped him; **but some doubted.**" When Thomas saw Jesus raised from the dead, he believed. But here, despite the evidence before their eyes of Christ's resurrection, some still doubted. Obviously, these doubting disciples did have good press agents, because their identities were suppressed! ²

John Proctor, commenting on the Matthew reading in the BRF *New Daylight* some years ago, says of doubt:

"Is doubt, the opposite of faith? Sometimes it is, but it can also be a step on the way to faith, a stage in working faith out." he continues; "Today, many Christians find that worship and doubt still mingle. We come to church, but we do not always leave our hesitations and uncertainties at the door. It would not be right if we did. Doubts and fears can be brought before God, who is caring, big and honest enough to handle them with us and help us wrestle with them. Doubt need not be the opposite of faith. Certainly, if doubt keeps us at a distance from Jesus, then faith is likely to suffer ..." ³

Surely, it is what we do with our doubts that matter. Do we let our doubts destroy, or do we use them as the catalyst to explore and understand?

I remember, in the early days of my more committed faith journey, we were living in New Zealand and my mother-in-law used to come and stay with us for a week at a time. She would love to get me into a 'deep and meaningful' discussion on all sorts of things. One of her favourite topics was faith and religious belief. I have to lay at her door, my toddling steps to try to verbalise what I believed and why. I used to stumble and struggle to find the 'right' words to explain some of the mysteries of our faith, and why I believed them. In the end I learnt that some things **are** a mystery and I had to 'hold them lightly', to take them on faith. Surely, that is what faith is. If it was certainty, it wouldn't be faith!

However, I believe that if the church is to be relevant in our culture, it will have to be a place where people can ask the questions that are really on their minds, where we are honest about our questions, and where we don't condemn those who are unsure, but together we can struggle with those questions and grow in the process.

We, the church, won't always have satisfactory answers, and we won't always agree on the ones we believe are correct. But if we can be a place where questioners, seekers, doubters, wonderers, and wanderers are welcome and free to speak, perhaps the church can be a place of hope and great faith. ¹

Please, don't be afraid of your doubts and questions, don't be concerned when someone says something you find challenging or even affronting. Use it as a positive, growth opportunity to delve into your own faith and work out and affirm exactly what it is that **you** believe.

"Blessed are the doubters, for their questions help strengthen their faith". ⁴

And may you find the grace to proclaim with Thomas "My Lord and my God!"

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

1. Chris Lockley quoting from a sermon by Les Klassen Hamm
2. Chris Lockley's *Missional Reflections* as posted on *midrash* in 2005.
3. John Proctor, writing in *New Daylight* reading for March 31, 2005.
4. Chris Lockley quoting from a sermon by Justin Fischer.