

The Touching of Thomas

Second Sunday of Easter, 12th April 2026

St Leonard's Denmark, Alison Kershaw

Acts 2.14a, 2.22-32, Psalm 16, 1 Peter 1.1-12, John 20.19-31

Through the written word and the spoken word may we know your Living Word, Jesus Christ our Saviour, Amen

How easily the moniker *Doubting Thomas* springs to mind – but it is most unfair to saddle and define Thomas in this way when he was not the only one to struggle to understand that Jesus had risen. No-one got it immediately. Only in Luke's gospel, do the spice-bearing women - Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others who were with them - believe the angel's words: "Remember how he told you, while he was in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." But they were batted away by the other disciples - "these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them." (Luke 24.1-12) In the longer ending of Mark's Gospel, the risen Christ appears to Mary Magdalene who "told those who had been with him while they were mourning and weeping" but "they would not believe it." (Mark 16.9) Nor, according to Mark, did they believe the two disciples who encountered him while walking in the country. (Mark 16.12) In Luke's expanded story of the encounter on the road to Emmaus, the two are "slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared" and do not recognise Jesus until they break bread together. The confirmation is experienced not as something believed with the eyes but in the heart: "were our hearts not burning within us?" (Luke 24:13-35)

In John's resurrection story, Mary Magdalene is the first to see the empty tomb – Simon Peter and the other disciple whom Jesus loved need to see for themselves – but do not understand what they see and simply leave. Mary alone stays and encounters the risen Christ who she at first does not recognise and mistakes for the gardener. John does not say whether the disciples believed her when she went, as Christ asked her, and said "I have seen the Lord." But the fact they have locked themselves away in fear suggests they are not altogether convinced. Those gathered in the locked room only came to believe because Jesus stood among them and showed them his hands and side.

Thomas was therefore no different in not simply accepting the word of others. Thomas in this moment between hearing and disbelieving and seeing and believing – is representative of them all – and of us. Jesus directs his message to all generations to come "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet come to believe." As though speaking directly to us in this room, John says there were many other signs of proof that Jesus gave to his disciples, "but these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."

So here we are - two millennia later– reading and hearing this ancient written word - to help us 'come to believe.' This is a great challenge for we have various ways of translating, reading and interpreting scripture, and for many of us the line between the mystery encapsulated in sacred story-telling, and historical fact is a shifting one. But while this is an important and interesting question, perhaps we ultimately 'come to believe' because of the way our hearts burn within us when we allow the story to go to work within us. We might come to believe as we recognise in these accounts something of our own encounter with the risen Christ.

For, as I run through each of these stories, it strikes me that Jesus appeared in different ways to each person. Mary hears her name spoken, the disciples on the road to Emmaus break bread with him, he appears on the seashore to those who have fruitlessly fished all night (John 21:1-14) and so on. Jesus did not reject, reprimand, or turn away from any who doubted or struggled to recognise him, but found a way into their hearts. And today we focus on Thomas, who in grief and fear is unable to accept what his friends have told him. Thomas needed to see and to touch. Thomas yearned for the real presence of his beloved teacher who he had seen die a terrible death. And perhaps we can see in this, the desire and the need of humanity as a whole that God answered in the incarnation – God became flesh that we might see and taste and know the goodness of divine life. It is not surprising that having absorbed the incarnation that we also need to see and taste and know the risen Christ. We might also dare to be as honest as Thomas and confess we need more than the witness of others – more than words on a page - however compelling, these words need to speak to something alive within us. Unlike Thomas, we cannot be in

the room with the yet to ascend risen Jesus – but we are blessed if we can nevertheless experience the risen Christ – the universal, cosmic Christ that always was and always will be present in the very substance of the world. We are blessed if we can also experience the breath of God, the Holy Spirit, in the same way that Jesus entered through locked doors and breathed upon the disciples and thrice said to them “Peace be with you.”

Let’s reflect on the connection between this life-giving breath or spirit and believing. During Lent we had Jesus’ teaching about the spirit: *The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with all who are born of the Spirit* soon followed by the words: *‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.* (John 3.1-17). We resisted reading this as a transactional pre-condition – *if you believe you will have eternal life.* We considered that the Greek word for believe is *pisteuō* (pist-yoo’-o), which implies a relationship of trust more than a cerebral position. The word is perhaps more accurately translated as *believe into* – a phrase invented by the Greek writers of the New Testament and found in the early Latin and English Bibles.ⁱ In John’s gospel, it appears about 90 times, referring not just to intellectual assent, but also meaning to have faith on, to lean one’s weight on someone, to entrust oneself.”ⁱⁱ So, we might read the well-known verse along these lines: The world is so loved that we are given the living gift and grace of God’s only Son – God’s goodness manifest in Christ for us, so all who *believe into* Christ may have eternal life. Believe into: trust, lean into, move into Christ, become a part – a member of Christ.

And so, Jesus says to Thomas, *Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe into me.* Don’t simply accept the legalistic evidence, but accept my invitation to enter into me, to know me with all your senses, to trust me with your whole heart. In the Orthodox tradition Thomas is not remembered as Doubting Thomas, but this story is celebrated as “The Touching of Thomas” or “The Belief of Thomas” – for it was by the invitation to touch that he came to believe and it was that belief that defined the remainder of his days as he spread the word far and wide – as tradition has it, through Palestine, Mesopotamia, Parthia, Ethiopia, India, and China.

We could say that Thomas’ open expression of doubt was a conduit for Christ’s love. In reaching out a questioning hand he not only touched, but was touched by his Lord and his God. This was Thomas’ way in – and perhaps ours too. If we push away or repress our questions we close ourselves off from receiving or discovering any kind of answer. Not that the answers are always spelt out – and many questions are just so big it is more a matter of living with the question than expecting an answer. In 1903, the Austrian poet, Rainer Maria Rilke wrote a well-loved piece of advice to a budding 19 year-old poet, that speaks very much to the Thomas in us all:

I want to beg you, as much as I can, dear sir, to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to *love the questions themselves* like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. *Live* the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.ⁱⁱⁱ

Living the question is perhaps another way of *believing into* Christ. We are blessed if - without having seen what the first disciples saw and having only our ancient Greek and Hebrew texts as witness - we believe into Christ. We are blessed if we believe into Christ by following his path, and by loving as Christ loved. We are blessed if we reach out exploratory hands to touch and be touched by our wounded healer, and as we acknowledge and tend the wounds of others. We are blessed if we can let our doubts and questions blow in the wind. We are blessed if we receive the life-giving breath of God as it enters through the locked doors of our hearts and minds and brings us the peace that passes all understanding.^{iv}

ⁱ see Natalya A. Cherry, *Believing into Christ: Relational Faith and Human Flourishing*, Baylor University Press, 2021

ⁱⁱ Br. Luis Enrique Hernandez Rivas, CFC *Come and Touch* Easter 2 (A) – April 12, 2026. The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, The Episcopal Church, New York,

<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/come-and-touch-easter-2-a-april-12-2026/>

ⁱⁱⁱ *Letters to a Young Poet* by Rainer Maria Rilke. Letter to Franz Xaver Kappus, 1903

^{iv} Philippians 4:7