

19th April 2020 6pm Thomas doubted – wouldn't you? Val Whiteman

Texts: [Acts chapter 2, verses 14a and 22 to 32](#) and
[John chapter 20, verses 19 to 31](#)

So we're going to be looking at the two readings we've just heard, the John reading about Thomas, and Peter after the resurrection. We're still thinking, in the Easter season, we're still thinking about resurrection. So I wondered what you're thinking, what your understanding of it, is. Just think for a moment, before I start, about where you are in thinking about resurrection.

When you think about the world at large, there are a lot of reasons why they don't believe in the resurrection of Jesus. Either it is that the Gospels have been written long, long after the event, so they don't count; the early church invented the resurrection; it was based on, I don't know, a spring resurrection of gods yearly, like Adonis, for instance, or the Egyptian god Horus. There are lots of interesting ideas about where resurrection came from. Either the disciples stole the body or they think about it as a mass hallucination, or most popularly possibly, Jesus really didn't rise from the dead but his spirit lived on. Unfortunately for all these naysayers and doubting people, the evidence from the gospels and from the letters in the Bible is absolutely clear. First of all, the evidence is early, so for instance, Paul writing in 1 Thessalonians, the first of the letters written about 51 AD says, in [1 Thessalonians] 4:14,

¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and was raised to life again, we also believe that when Jesus returns, God will bring back with him the believers who have died. [NLT]

So right from the start, I mean, this is something that Paul is saying, as a given in the church, by 51 AD, certainly, there was no doubt. That was the focus of your belief, that Jesus rose from the dead. So, what people are saying in the world about this uncomfortable fact, is simply not true. And here in John, we have the story about Thomas.

Thomas the twin is only mentioned as one of the disciples apart from here in John's Gospel, and his nickname 'Doubting Thomas' obviously comes from this story. We don't know, John doesn't tell us, why he wasn't with the other disciples at earlier appearances of Jesus. But Thomas makes the entirely reasonable point that people who die don't generally come back to life. The Gospel [writers] were keen to point out that what happened to Jesus was unusual, unique. I mean, they weren't stupid. They knew that people don't normally live after crucifixion, Roman soldiers make sure of it. So Thomas isn't really being faithless, but sensible. Like the other disciples, he had to do a rapid rethink of what the Kingdom and what the Messiah-ship meant, after Jesus' death. He thought that Jesus was the Messiah who was going to bring salvation and the new kingdom to Israel. And then on Good Friday, the dream of those three years ended. I don't know whether you can imagine it. Somebody that you love as dearly as they loved Jesus, respected, feared, in awe of, the one who stopped the storm in its tracks, suddenly on the cross, powerless and dying in huge pain. How do you cope with that?

We know now the stages that people go through in grief. People talk about the shock, the denial, the pain, the guilt, and that's just at the beginning of the grieving process. And remember, they've only had three days. And remember, too, that the disciples have all run away, or implicitly or explicitly denied Jesus. And also remember that they live in fear that what the Romans did to Jesus, they would do to his followers. And imagine what it must have been like to be Thomas.

But then the other disciples start saying that Jesus is alive. Now, in first century Palestine, from the reading I've done, there was an expectation that people would rise again, but not like Jesus did. At the end of the age, they thought, God would bring people back to life again. So this was a totally unexpected event as far as they're concerned. Now, I've heard lots of sermons, and probably you have too, which say that Thomas should have not had doubts. But I don't think he'd be human if he didn't have them. And then let's look at Jesus's reaction to what Thomas says. When Jesus appears to Thomas, first of all, he blesses the disciples with peace. All the Gospels say that they were terrified when Jesus appeared because they just didn't know what to make of him. And then look what Jesus says to Thomas, he specifically picks him out. He's says,

“Put your fingers here, see my hands, reach out your hands and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” [NIVUK]

So he doesn't actually tell Thomas off for doubting, he removes the cause for doubt. So how gracious he is and how understanding of the way humans work. After all, he should be, he made us!

God never minds when we bring the truth of our hearts to him. For instance, how are we coping at the moment? We're all, if we're human, probably afraid of the new circumstances we find ourselves in. We fear for those we love. We empathise with those who've already lost loved ones, who weren't able to be with them to say goodbye. And we want to stand by those who are grieving and we can't. So what do we do? We do what we can do. We take our concerns to God and we tell him how we truly, really feel. The result of letting Jesus know how he feels is Thomas' sudden realisation of who Jesus is. He says, “My Lord and my God!” Now legend has it that Thomas was a disciple who took the Christian faith as far away as India. The church in South India was founded by him. People are still called Thomas in the church in South India because of it. So what a difference in outlook from sceptical to convinced and empowered! It takes somebody with a huge amount of courage to set off into the unknown, and take the Gospel as far away as you can, beyond your known world.

Let's look briefly at the Acts reading. Peter, the denier, the skulker in the upper room behind locked doors with the other disciples, is out there on the street, empowered by the Spirit and telling everyone within hearing the Good News about Jesus. I read recently that Charles Colson, the man in prison because of Watergate, was convinced of the truth of the Resurrection because of the action of the disciples. He said, I know the Resurrection is a fact, because Watergate proved it to me. How? Because twelve men testified they'd seen Jesus raised from the dead, and then they proclaimed that truth for 40 years, never once denying it. Every one was beaten, tortured, stoned, and put in prison. They would not have endured if that weren't true. Watergate embroiled twelve of the most powerful men in the world, and they couldn't keep alive for three weeks. You're telling me twelve apostles could keep alive for 40 years? Absolutely impossible.

So what changed? Jesus changed the disciples. The power of the Spirit changed the disciples. And remember, Paul tells us that the power working within us is the same power that raised Jesus from the dead. Just pause for a moment and take that in: the same power that raised Jesus from the dead is within us.

Is that your experience?

I think sometimes in the western church, we've had so much security and prosperity, that we've kind of forgotten the importance of Resurrection, we've forgotten to go back to the Author and Founder of our faith. And we've doubted whether he is Lord of all because we focused on other things that give us the

power and the prosperity we need. At the moment, when things are stripped away, and where we're facing a circumstance that we can't control, I think we need to go back to our Lord and our God and say, what is it that we believe in? Actually, where is our faith founded? Is it founded on knowing the resurrected Jesus, of knowing the power of his Spirit? Are we sure that we're founded on that? If we're not, and I think quite a few of us go through lots of different kinds of doubts as we grow in the Christian faith, then go back to Jesus. Say, "I really don't know. I'm really struggling with doubts here. I really need you to be in front of me. I really need you to talk to me." And then listen, do listen, don't go off and say, "Well, he didn't speak to me," if you haven't given him a chance. But listen to the Author and Founder of our faith, and he will speak to you. And just as he did with Thomas, he will reassure you and give you a sense of his presence and his peace and the power of his Spirit so that when we can, we'll be out on the streets proclaiming the power of the Lord Jesus, the risen, resurrected, Lord Jesus, because we know that power within us. So if we spend a few moments now, just thinking about the founder of our faith, our own faith and the doubts and fears that we might have.

Amen

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