

Let us start with doubt!

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A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Gareth Thomas-Burchell

Easter 2 A

1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

A Seasonal Thought

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We are some weeks into staying at home, with the coronavirus still making quite its mark worldwide. There have been some horrific announcements of some fatalities right across the world. And yet little signs of hope as well, as we realize that the efforts we are taking are making a difference for good. But there still a long way to go.

I reflect what it must have been like for the disciples - in that time when Jesus was being revealed to them in a new way. They say he's been resurrected but they couldn't explain it. They could only know it for themselves within.

Some of them even tried to go back to their old ways. What else would you do? Jesus is here no longer, beside us, they would say.

But you couldn't go back to the old ways. We had to find a new way. And that new way took them to whole new worlds, and whole new understandings, of what it means to be people together in community, based on love, and a new way of living.

I suspect our future may have some elements of that built into it. Going back to the old ways won't be easy or quick or even ordered.

Finding new ways that give us life together as a community will be. So, this week, many weeks in and still many weeks to go - staying at home, dealing with a virus that's covering the whole world right now, we might think of what gives us life in each moment in each day.

And how that might grow into a new way of being that is good for the world.

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Poor Thomas! Our watered-down Sunday school lessons make him the weak-link disciple of the post-resurrection Jesus. This doubting disciple who had to see in order to believe, is now forever etched as one of the villains of the Easter story.

To doubt is tainted to mean “to not believe” until satisfactory proof is given. Belief is conditional and comes with a personally driven agenda. Therefore, for those who already believe, doubt is an impediment to faith, and is therefore bad.

Or is it?

On literal and simplistic face value, the believers, or the other disciples, are the good guys - and Thomas the doubter, is the bad guy. What kind of disciple was he? Of course, a more mature reading of the story knows the answer to that: What kind of disciple was he? Well - the regular kind. The human kind. The same kind as the rest of us. Of course he was doubtful. Aren't we all? Of course he needed something to see, to touch, to hear, to taste, to smell. Don't we all?

In the liminal space of the Easter season, the post-resurrection time, we are invited into the space of being vulnerable, to what we have for a long time understood as normal, the difference of a new way of being is a threat and a challenge. For the disciples it was the difference of a tangible Jesus that they knew before his crucifixion, and this post-resurrection Jesus who suddenly appears, offers peace and a command, and then disappears again.

For the disciples, it was the transition time when Jesus was commanding them to do the same as he. And this is relevant to the story of Thomas. I quote a source to which I often refer: *Jesus' commands were three-fold, to do mission to the nations, to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, and to have the power to forgive sins. There is a transfer here to the power of the resurrected Jesus to the disciples. This transfer requires a new definition of faith, for it implies the absence of Jesus.*

So there is a distinction made, between what the other disciples experienced when they “saw and believed” - and Thomas - who had to “see to believe”. Here is the struggle of coping with life without the Jesus who the disciples knew before his death, to a resurrected Jesus with whom the relationship now is based on faith. So the question is now, how do we live in a faith relationship with Jesus? This is the question of with which Thomas had to struggle.

Personally, I prefer to listen to another person who struggles with faith than a person who claims absolute certainty. At best the expression of certainty is arrogant and at worst downright dangerous. One person has said that, “*doubt is the essence of faith, and not faith's opposite.*” I believe in matters of discussing faith, having a conversation that starts with doubt is a better starting point than one that starts with certainty. It is the difference between an open ended conversation and a closed one.

When we hear the story of Thomas and his desire to be authentic in his belief of the risen Jesus, we join in his struggle. I find it impossible to deride Thomas' doubt, because my faith in Jesus started with doubt. Indeed, is not that the case with all of us? Certainly most of us, anyway!

Despite our Sunday School teaching, and our youth group discussions, and even young adult bible studies, surely we have in our adult years, come face to face with getting real with all the stuff that we have been told in our younger years, and tried to address those niggling questions that have been bugging us for years.

The invitation, on the first Sunday after Easter, is to start our faith journey with doubt. Doubt is a good start. With doubt, we examine new possibilities that are beyond our experience. With doubt, we question pre-conceived understandings. With doubt, we enter into the world of imagination and hope. With doubt, we give life a chance. With doubt, we begin to believe in something impossible ... like resurrection, like rising from the dead.

*"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe"*, says Jesus. Do we blithely nod in agreement? There is that certain squirm in the seat, when we say, "yeah but." However, I do not hear from Jesus the call to have blind faith, but a faith that examines, thinks, shares, questions, and so enables the beginnings of faith to take shape.

Lord Tennyson claimed: *"There is more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds"* and with Frederick Buechner, who famously said: *"Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving."*

So let us start our belief in the risen Christ with doubt, just like Thomas, because that enables us to question and examine what we believe. Let us doubt even for a moment, and question our unbelief as well as our belief. Doubt leads to faith. Doubt is the essence of coming to faith. Doubt is the entree to faith. Doubting is the start of thinking and verbalising the things that are important and worthwhile. Doubting in the post-Easter and resurrected Jesus, is the beginning of being a disciple. It is the beginning!

And let us also note well, that faith is not something that can be acquired by us alone, but it is indeed a gift from God and is followed by a call to discipleship.

So welcome to the community of Christ! Doubt is a part of us ... but Jesus remains present and says, *"Peace be with you."* When we say the same to each other, the presence of Jesus disarms the doubt in ourselves to be his faithful followers. Jesus assures us that we are loved.

Belief in the Risen Christ starts with doubt, but once we open our eyes, we recognise the presence of Jesus among us all. We are the Risen Christ, we are the church, the stumbling and staggering and struggling and faulty and doubting body of Christ.

Doubting is a good start to being the faithful and believing resurrected people that Jesus Christ has chosen. We are Christ's disciples and we have been sent out in peace to show the world that Christ is risen.