

John 20:19-21; 24-31

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the disciples had gathered together and locked the doors of the place because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. So Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. Just as the Father has sent me, I also send you."

Now Thomas (called the "Twin"), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he replied, "Unless I see the wounds from the nails in his hands, and put my finger into the wounds from the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will *never* believe it!"

Eight days later the disciples were again together in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and examine my hands. Extend your hand and put it into my side. Do not continue in your unbelief, but believe." Thomas replied to him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are the people who have not seen and yet have believed."

Now Jesus performed many other miraculous signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Sermon: What Evidence Do You Require?

Rene Descartes, the famous French Philosopher and Mathematician, said “I doubt therefore I think; I think therefore I am”! Those present here who, like myself, have been trained in the sciences will have been expressly encouraged to doubt. We never take things on face value, but will question and scrutinise, and will seek alternative explanations for our observations. As such we have a great affinity with the skepticism of the man who goes down in history as “doubting” Thomas. It is sad that many Christians are tormented by this story because, they think, Jesus is actually reprimanding Thomas and that therefore *to doubt is to sin*. In contrast, Descartes thought that doubting was the way to *truth*!

Let me say at the outset, the notion that *to “doubt is to sin”* is a modern idea, and therefore this incidence in John’s gospel should *not* be assessed in that light. What John is doing is bringing themes together from earlier in his gospel and creating a literary climax. Just before the start of today’s reading, Jesus meets Mary Magdalene who initially mistakes him for the gardener; but once he says her name, she *knows* it is Jesus. She then runs to the other disciples exclaiming “*I have seen the Lord!*”¹ They don’t believe Mary’s news and John does not tell us why; they are therefore no better than Thomas and so he should not be singled out. Later, the grieving followers of Jesus met together in a secure place because they were afraid. We need not read too much into whether the doors were simply shut or locked (the Greek can mean either). John is not claiming that the resurrection body of Jesus can dematerialise and re-materialise through walls like a Star-Trek teleporter, rather, closed doors are no obstacles to the risen Christ - *you just can’t keep him out!*

Jesus then greets them: “Peace be with you,” or “*shalom*” - the standard rich Hebrew greeting meaning “be in a state of peace, with restored relationships, of wholeness and wellbeing.” In this case, this greeting was perhaps more literal, in that the disciples were already fearful – terrified of being arrested and killed for following Jesus. John tells us that Jesus then showed them his hands and his side, and the disciples *rejoiced* when they recognised it was the Lord. Again, John’s readers would have recalled what Jesus told his disciples earlier in 16:22, “you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you.” Once the disciples were convinced it was the risen Jesus who was with them, he *again* says, “Peace be with you.” This repeated greeting is, I suggest, more profound in that it echoes the phrase John gives earlier in 14:27, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you” says Jesus, “I do not give it to you as the world does. Do not let your hearts be distressed or lacking in courage (NET).” These two promises of peace and joy are fulfilled by the end of John’s Gospel.

And with that joy and excitement the disciples, of course, tell Thomas, “*We have seen the Lord*” - exactly what Mary had told *them*. However, Thomas is not impressed; he does not believe it. He wants hard evidence – what we might call “proof” today – without which he would *never* believe. That is why we love Thomas, because he is the incredulous nonbeliever who hides inside of every

¹ John 20:18

person, including believing Christians, since he resists easy answers to hard questions of faith. How does Jesus respond to Thomas' well-known, bold assertion? Jesus *seeks out* Thomas; Jesus *takes the initiative* and *invites* the scrutiny, in this case for Thomas to examine his wounds. It is *not* a sin to question, seek evidence, to require convincing. "Here is the evidence *you* stipulated," says Jesus and he shows him his hands and side ready for Thomas to examine.

Then Jesus makes this exhortation: "*Do not be unbelieving, but believing*", or "*do not be faithless, but faithful*" – the word "doubt" is not used in the Greek. After all, you have to believe in something *first* before you can *doubt* it! I often say, "Faith and doubt are two sides of the same coin; you can't have one without the other." The opposite of faith is *not* doubt, but *certainty*. And we are called to "walk by faith and *not* by sight."² The story, then, does not focus on doubt and skepticism, but on the *grounds* for faith. What Jesus says, according to John, is this: "Do not continue in a state of unbelief when all the evidence demands belief." Jesus is not shaming or reprimanding Thomas for doubt, rather he gives Thomas what he needs for faith. For John, *unbelief* is sin, *not doubt*. Moreover, Jesus providing an individual what he or she needs for faith is a feature of John's gospel, just re-read the encounters of the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4), the healing of the man born blind (John 9), the raising of Lazarus (John 11), and so on. As we will see in a moment, that is a key aspect of John's gospel agenda.

Of course this moment baffles Thomas, just as the resurrected Jesus baffles others – then and now. We can be confident John didn't intend this to be mere fiction! The whole point of the story is that it the person before Thomas is the *same* Jesus, as evidenced by the marks of the nails on his hands and the wound in his side. It is not a ghost,³ nor is it somebody else pretending to be Jesus; it is him. This is the person that the grave couldn't contain any longer. Jesus comes and goes as though he belongs in *both* our world and in a different world, one which intersects with ours at various points.

Thomas' response in this resurrection appearance is, "My Lord and my God." "Lord" and "God" are the Greek equivalents of two Hebrew words for God (YHWH and Elohim). Thomas recognises *God fully revealed in Jesus*. Earlier in John 14:7, Jesus says to Thomas, "If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you *do* know him and have seen him." It seems Thomas did not really understand those words until now. While his intellectual honesty may make him slow to believe, but after his encounter with the risen Christ, Thomas makes one of the most profound acclamations of faith in whole of the New Testament.

One of the things that John and other gospel writers describe, in some detail, is the various encounters Jesus had with *individuals*, including Mary and Thomas. He did that then and I believe that by the Holy Spirit, he does that still today to anyone who genuinely seeks him. John anticipates what his reader might have thought, "That's OK for you, John, you actually saw the *risen* Christ, but we cannot have that kind of evidence now he is ascended." John then tells us that Jesus said, "Blessed are

² 2 Cor 5:7.

³ Luke 24:36-43.

the people who have not seen and yet have believed.” One of the key points of the story is that Jesus *comes* to us and *reveals* himself to us, where ever we might be – even if that is out at the far edge of faith, so much so that we have forgotten even how to believe. And there is another thing; just like the disciples, we might not recognise Jesus straight away because of our preconceived ideas.

What don't *you* believe? What evidence do *you* want? This need not be concerning the resurrection directly, but, say, evidence that God actually *loves* you – as a person, when deep down you struggle to believe God even *cares* for you. You might want evidence that he has really *forgiven* you, when your heart tells you that God is ashamed of you and you feel perpetually judged and condemned? It may be that you are disappointed with God because you feel he has let you down, and therefore you need some kind of reassurance. Think about that: What don't you really believe in your *heart*? What evidence do you want God to provide to convince you otherwise? Do we have the courage of Thomas to articulate what it will take for us to believe? We will never have proof – but the concept of *proof* is an overrated idea, even in science. But I believe Jesus will give us sufficient evidence – if we want it. That evidence may come in surprising ways, so we need to open our eyes to recognise it. Moreover, in the different seasons of our life, Christ's appearance will change, and hence we need to recognise him *again*.

John ends his account by shifting gears and speaking directly to his reader:

“Now Jesus performed many other miraculous signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”⁴

John's purpose in his whole gospel is for *all* his readers to get to the same conclusion that Thomas did: to see God fully revealed in Jesus and say, “My Lord and my God.” The purpose is not merely to believe Jesus rose from the dead – rather the resurrection is another sign of Jesus' *identity*. Go back to chapter 1: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. . . . No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.”⁵ That Jesus who came from God's glory has now returned to God's glory. The story is not focused on Thomas, or on unbelief, but on affirming Jesus *is* the Messiah, the Son of God. So we are left with John's implied challenge: when we look to Jesus, who exactly do we see? May our response be that of Thomas, a conviction born of the life-giving Spirit – that Jesus is God, fully revealed, and hence exclaim, “My master and my God.”

Peace be with you. Amen.

⁴ John 20:30-31.

⁵ John 1:14,18.