

SEEING and BELIEVING

John 20:19-31 [MW21-13]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton, Sunday 11 April 2021

Doubt, wanting to be sure

- it's very natural, understandable

Scottish evangelist, writer and lecturer Henry Drummond wrote:

We are born questioners. Look at the wonderment of a little child in its eyes before it can speak. The child's great word when it begins to speak is "why." Every child is full of every kind of question, about every kind of thing that moves, and shines, and changes, in the little world in which it lives. That is the incipient doubt in the nature of man. Respect doubt for its origin. It is an inevitable thing. It is not a thing to be crushed. It is a part of man as God made him. ... Doubt is the prelude of knowledge.

Nobody wants to be naïve

- nobody wants to rush in only to have their hopes dashed
it can be useful to be a 'realist', to be pragmatic
- there's nothing wrong with looking for a sure foundation

And, if we are honest, most of us would agree, I think

- that there are echoes of Thomas in us
there is something about wanting to be 110% sure
- and after all that Thomas had been through who could blame him
who could blame him ...
- yet history remembers Thomas as 'the doubter'
he is immortalised in the phrase "doubting Thomas"

Maybe it would be helpful to hear from Thomas himself:

I can't forget that horrible scene at Golgotha: blood running down Jesus' face, his hands, his feet. Groans of agony escaping through the clenched teeth of those on either side of him. The other disciples and I fled. We feared for our lives. We thought the Roman soldiers would come after us next, so we hid in homes all over Jerusalem that night.

All the while I could think of only one thing – he was gone. He would never come back. Our plans were ruined. All of our hopes were shattered. I had never been so despondent in my life. Everything we had worked for and dreamed about in the last three years was nailed to that cross. It was finished.

I loved him. I was devoted to him. I believed in him. In fact, I was ready to die for him ... His death should not have come as a surprise to any of us. He had given us little hints that this would happen one day. One time he said he would go away and prepare a place for us. None of us knew what he meant, so I said, "Lord, we don't know where you are going." I wasn't doubting his word; I just didn't understand. Jesus hinted about his death, but I guess we were all a little slow to catch on. Maybe we didn't want to admit that things might work out differently than we wanted. We planned to rule with him over an earthly kingdom. A couple of the other disciples even asked to sit at his left and at his right. Now he was gone forever, and all those plans lay crumbled at our feet.

Then, on the morning after the Sabbath, some of the women and later Peter and John went to the tomb. They claimed it was empty and that Jesus had risen from the dead. That night they met together in our secret meeting place. I wasn't there. With Jesus dead, what was the point of getting together! According to those who were there however, Jesus appeared!

Over the next few days they sought me out and repeatedly told me that Jesus was alive ... but I would not believe.

I was so dejected I didn't dare believe. Unless I could put my fingers where the nails pierced his hands; unless I could touch that horrible gash in his side; unless I could see him and touch him and have proof that he was alive ... I could not believe.

It's not that I didn't want to believe. I did! But I had to believe on my terms. Too often I had got my hopes up only to have them dashed. I wasn't going to be taken in again.

The others continued to insist that they had seen Jesus alive. They offered their own witness as proof to me. But this was not the time for delusions fuelled by wishful thinking. I needed to see for myself. I didn't want to hear about him. I wanted to feel him, to know for sure he was alive.

About a week later they all gathered in that same room. This time I was there. Much to our surprise, Jesus appeared in our midst. He didn't come through the door – it was locked because we were all afraid. Jesus greeted us, but none of us could respond. Then the most amazing thing happened. Jesus spoke my name and said, “Thomas, put your finger here where the nails were. Put your hand into the wound in my side and believe.”

I was amazed. Dumbfounded. Those were the exact demands I had made in order to believe. I had said it would be impossible to believe unless I could touch his hands and his side. Each thing I had demanded, Jesus now commanded.

What more could I say? In one brief encounter he removed my doubt completely. Forever. This was unmistakably Jesus. I fell to my knees and said, “My Lord and my God.”

Yes I had doubts. I was doubt itself! But no longer. My doubt evaporated like the morning dew. If anyone doubts that Jesus is alive, that Jesus is God, doubt no longer. Jesus words to me were a gentle rebuke. He said that I believed because I saw, but those who have not seen and yet believe are the ones truly blessed.

You know who that is don't you?

- those who have not seen and yet believe?
that's us
- we can be truly blessed, more blessed even than Thomas who saw and touched

In another one of those illogical paradoxes of faith

- our faith, our believing is somehow more solid by not seeing
by taking the word of the witnesses who have gone before us
- by taking the word of scripture
by taking the word of history
by taking the word of testimony
- somehow we are able to “see” in a different way
to see and know in a different and more far-reaching way than Thomas

Thomas met the Risen Lord

- we are not able to have the same experience Thomas had
yet we too can meet the Risen Lord
- that's what Easter tells us

Let's hear again from Thomas:

When you come face to face with the resurrected Christ, the voice of doubt, despair and despondency will be silenced. It must give way to the voice of faith and hope, because this Jesus is not a dead saviour in some Jerusalem grave. He is the living Lord of Glory!

I doubt no more. I have seen the resurrected Christ. The darkness of night has changed to the light of morning. Death is conquered by life. The Lord is risen indeed. This changes everything!

[space for reflection]

A final comment on “doubt”

A workman of the great chemist Michael Faraday accidentally knocked a silver cup into a solution of acid. It was promptly dissolved, eaten up by the acid. The workman was terribly disturbed by the accident. The chemist came in and put a chemical into the jar, and shortly all the silver was precipitated to the bottom. The shapeless mass was lifted out and sent to the silversmith, and the cup was restored to its original shape. If a human genius can do a things like this, why should we doubt that God can raise the dead?

Let's pray together

- the words are on the screen
but they come from our Prayer Book, page 674
- a prayer for St Thomas the Apostle
who is remembered on July 3 or December 21
- a prayer in memory, in honour, of our Thomas
an encouragement for us in these days after Easter

*Christ our light,
like Thomas we need to see,
need to touch,
need to be sure before we believe.
When we don't know, help us to trust;
when we can't see, help us to keep on walking.
Amen.*