

JOHN 20.24-29: FROM DOUBT TO FAITH

[Chelmsford 24 April 2011]

Today is the most exciting day of the year
Not even Christmas morning can compare with Easter Sunday morning
This is the day of the resurrection
This is the day when we celebrate that God raised Jesus from the dead
"The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed! Hallelujah!"
Yes, Easter Sunday is the most exciting day in the Christian year

Yet sadly not all share our excitement - not everybody experiences our Easter joy.
It's not that they don't want to - many would love to - their difficulty is that in all good conscience they cannot shout "The Lord is risen" - they have yet to believe.

Thomas was a person who found believing difficult.
"Unless I see the scar of the nails in his hands & put my finger on those scars and my hand in his side, I will not believe" (John 20.25).
His trouble was that he hadn't been present on the 1st Easter Day when the Risen Lord appeared to his disciples in the Upper Room - he had missed that visit that turned the sorrow of the ten into rapturous joy. Over against the excitement of his friends he could only wearily shake his head: **"Unless I see... I will not believe"**

In some respects Thomas' reaction was thoroughly reasonable – the fact is that the dead men do not come to life again - once dead, people are normally always dead. And yet, from another perspective, Thomas' reaction was thoroughly unreasonable – for he had before him two of the strongest pieces of evidence for the resurrection

1. Thomas disbelieved the witness of the empty tomb

All the gospels report that on the 1st day of the week, while it was still early, some **women** went to the tomb only to discover the stone rolled away, and the body no longer there.

Indeed, it was not just the women. John tells us that **Peter and John**, were immediately on the spot to check out the women's story. They conducted a careful & thorough investigation - but all they found were the linen wrappings.

I think it quite likely that **Thomas** too visited the tomb to check out the story for himself - he was just the sort of guy who wasn't prepared to believe anything on the say-so of others.

And yet, even the evidence of the empty tomb did not persuade him that Jesus was alive. Thomas just couldn't believe. It was all too much.

But what other explanation could there have been?

- Thomas would have been the first to agree that the disciples hadn't spirited the body away.
- Nor could anybody else have removed the body - otherwise they would have produced the decaying corpse once news got around that Jesus' disciples were regrouping under the belief that Jesus had risen from the dead.

The empty tomb is a conundrum which needs to be explained by those who disbelieve.

2) Thomas disbelieved the witness of others

In the first place he disbelieved *Mary Magdalene*. John tells the story of how Mary, standing weeping outside the tomb, initially mistook Jesus for the gardener - but then to her great amazement discovered that it was Jesus - she immediately went and told the disciples, "**I have seen the Lord**" (John 20.18).

But Thomas didn't believe her. And fair enough. I can understand Thomas saying: "*You can't believe a woman like Mary - she's far too emotional a woman*".

But he also disbelieved *his fellow apostles* who claimed to have seen the risen Jesus - not just one of them, but all ten of them.

Thomas would have known that they weren't in the business of making up stories about Jesus.

He would have known that the last person they expected to see was Jesus.

Yet when they claimed to have seen the Lord, Thomas did not believe.

Thomas has not been the last to dismiss the resurrection appearances of Jesus.

There have been sceptics down through the centuries who have tried to explain them away as hallucinations. But hallucinations come to people wanting to see a person – a widow for instance, grieving the loss of her husband, hallucinates and believes that she has seen her husband in the house.

But the appearances of Jesus were different

- first, *the disciples did not expect to see Jesus* – Luke tells us that when the disciples in the upper room first saw Jesus "**they were terrified, thinking that they were seeing a ghost**" (Lk 24.37)
- secondly, the appearances *lasted for more than a few seconds* - John tells us that on one occasion Jesus actually took time to have breakfast with his disciples

Thomas, however, just couldn't believe - what was missing for him was the element of personal experience.

3. Thomas came to believe

But then something happened which caused Thomas to change his mind

A week later Jesus appeared again to his disciples – and this time Thomas was present. Jesus turned to Thomas: "**Put your finger here, and look at my hands; then stretch out your hand and put it in my side. Stop your doubting and believe**" (John 20.27).

But there was no need for Thomas to do that. All of a sudden his doubts were removed. He was so overwhelmed that he cried out: "**My Lord and my God**" (John 20.28). Significantly Thomas was the first person to worship Jesus as God.

From the furnace of his doubt emerges the finest confession of faith found in the NT

But Jesus went on: "**Do you believe because you see me? How happy are those who believe without seeing me**" (John 20.29).

Normally we say "*seeing is believing*" - but for Christians "*believing is seeing*". Many of us here do believe – but I guess that there are a good number of *Thomasases present this morning who do not believe*, who do not see

- you would love to believe but in all honesty you cannot
- you would love to enter into the excitement of Easter Day, and yet you feel you would be a hypocrite.

If this is where you are, please *don't feel guilty*. There is nothing wrong in doubting. For *doubt can be the pathway to belief*.

Thomas Merton, the radical American contemplative monk once wrote: "*Faith means doubt, it is not the suppression of doubt. You overcome doubt by going through it*"

Indeed, he goes so far as to say that "*the man of faith who has never experienced doubt is not a man of faith*". I don't think I would agree with him there. For there are some who believe whose life has never been complicated by unbelief.

But there are many others whose path to faith has been tortuous.

If you are struggling with faith, then *let Thomas be a sign of hope to you* - that the most perplexed of unbelievers can become the most exultant Christian of all.

Take heart from *a modern Thomas*, the Russian Fyodor Dostoevsky, who once said: "*It is not as a boy I believe in Christ. My hosanna has passed through a great furnace of doubts*"

Doubts can be overcome - they can turn to faith - provided three factors are present.

(a) **Doubt must be honest doubt**

Not all doubters have any desire to believe. Some doubters are simply sceptics who seek to 'protect' themselves from Christian commitment through their scepticism. They are dishonest doubters, in the sense that they are not willing to 'doubt their doubts'.

But those who doubt sincerely, who long for certitude, will eventually emerge into the bright sunlight of full faith.

My mind goes to some words found in Jer 29.13 NRSV, where God says "**If you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart**".

Although *Thomas* was a natural doubter, I don't think he enjoyed his doubts - he *wanted to believe*. The very strength of his protestations when the disciples claimed to have seen Jesus probably indicates that he had a strong desire to believe - and yet what he regarded as 'commonsense', as also perhaps a fear of disillusionment held him back (So William Temple).

(b) **Doubt must be prepared to face up to the evidence.**

Doubt that simply buries its head in the sand will get nobody nowhere.

The honest doubter must be prepared to look into the story of Jesus - to examine the Gospel narratives.

I find it significant that immediately after the story of Thomas coming to believe in the Risen Jesus, John wrote: "**Jesus performed many other miracles which are not written down in this book. But these have been in order that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through your faith in him you may have life**" (John 20.30,31).

Sir Walter Scott once wrote: "*There is a vulgar incredulity which in historical matters, as well as in those of religion, finds it easier to doubt than to examine*". I believe that to be true.

Sometimes doubt is simply an excuse for intellectual laziness.

People aren't prepared to go to the trouble of examining the evidence.

If you are in the category of a doubter, let me encourage you to ***face up to the evidence for the resurrection*** - to my mind it takes more faith to disbelieve than to believe. Lord Darling, a former Lord Chief Justice of England said: "*In favour [of the resurrection] as a living truth there exists such overwhelming evidence, positive & negative, factual & circumstantial, that no intelligent jury in the world could fail to bring in a verdict that the resurrection story is not true*".

But there is one further step still required

(c) Doubt must be exposed to the test of faith

Jesus said: "**Do you believe because you see me? How happy are those who believe without seeing me**".

Strange as it may sound, ***it is in believing that we see the risen Jesus.***

Certainty only comes as we take the leap of faith.

It is not until we jump until we truly know the reality of the Risen Lord Jesus Faith is like parachuting from an aeroplane - the only way one knows whether or not the chute will hold one up is to actually leap out of the plane.

The Psalmist was right when he said: "**O taste and see that the Lord is good**" (Ps 34.8 NRSV). The truth is that *Christianity has never been tried and found wanting: it has often been not tried, yet found wanting.* We have to take the leap of faith if we would experience the truth of the Risen Jesus.

If it sounds unreasonable, consider:

- ***the exercise of faith is not peculiar to the Christian religion*** - it is a constant feature of life. Every time you go to the supermarket to ***buy food***, you are engaged in an act of faith, for you have no certainty that the food you buy will not poison you. Every couple that ***marries*** engages in an act of faith - however much they may think they know about one another, it is still a risk
- ***the exercise of faith in the Risen Jesus is not to be compared to a blind leap into the dark*** - there are good grounds for believing in the resurrection. When Jesus said: "**How happy are those who believe without seeing me**" he was not promoting credulity. He was not endorsing a belief without enquiry or consideration.
- ***the exercise of no-faith is also an exercise of faith.*** This is brought out by Sheldon Vanauken's description of his struggled to believe or not:

"There is a gap between the probable and the proved. How was I to cross it? If I were to stake my whole life on the risen Christ, I wanted proof, I wanted certainty. I wanted to see him eat a bit of fish. I wanted letters of fire across the sky. I got none of these... It was a question of whether I was to accept him - or reject him. My God! There was a gap behind me as well! Perhaps the leap to acceptance was a horrifying gamble - but what of the leap to rejection? There might be no certainty that Christ was God - but by God, there was no certainty that he was not. This was not to be borne. I could not reject Jesus. There was only one thing to do once I had seen the gap behind me. I turned away from it, and flung myself over the gap towards Jesus".

4. Experience Easter with Thomas – and with Tania

Believing is reasonable

This was the experience of Thomas – and this is the experience of Tania too.

True, as far as I am aware, Tania has not experienced the doubts of Thomas

But she has experienced the reality of Jesus in her life.

And this morning she wants to publicly nail her colours to the mast – and in so doing challenge each one of us here.

Experience Easter – that is the strap-line on our publicity this Easter

It is also the thrust of this service.

Experience the joy, the thrill, the excitement of discovering that Jesus is alive.