

John 20: 19ff – The disciples experience the risen Jesus – Thomas last (Tutshill expand – more time)

Prayer.

It is not unusual to doubt. In fact, it can even be healthy, don't believe everything you are told! (I even doubt, or rather I do not *trust* the weighing scales for goodness sake – can't be right, must need replacing – I'm not that heavy....!!!)

'I can't get my head round that.' we say when despite the evidence we really can't quite believe. 'Surely not that can't be right...I want to see that for myself.' And then we are assailed by fake news, spun media reports, skewed social media accounts. Maybe our head knows but our heart lags behind, we do not know what to *trust*.

So I think it is a bit mean of all of us to label our central character today as '*doubting Thomas*.' If we look at the rest of those disciples, as well as ourselves, we see just the same. Maybe Thomas was just a bit more honest!

In our gospel story, early on the first day, Mary went to the disciples after her encounter in the garden, and said 'I have seen the Lord.' She had, I imagine gone to the tomb simply expecting to see a dead person.

So do the disciples rejoice at this news and thank God? Nope. Later, 'On the evening of the first day of the week....', were they rejoicing in their God given liberation, their delight in the message that Jesus is alive? Nope! Just a few hours after Mary had excitedly told them – where were they? "They were together with the doors locked for fear of the Jews." They did not believe – they could not get their head round Mary's testimony. But, Jesus came and stood among them ... and the disciples *were* overjoyed when *they* saw the Lord." 'Peace be with you' he said, and 'receive the Holy Spirit'.

But Thomas was not with them and when told of *this* encounter, he too expressed doubt and even announced that he would not believe until he could actually touch the wounds of Jesus. So, a week later, this time Thomas is with them all and again the doors were locked. I must just point out that this was simply not the cultural norm. Houses at that time were open to all to wander in and out and share whatever food and drink the hosts offered. So fear had robbed them, of the usual open house social freedom, *and* of 'rejoicing'. Again Jesus appears in their midst and again says 'Peace be with you.' He

encouraged Thomas to touch the wounds of his crucifixion saying: ‘Stop doubting and believe.’”

Thomas said to him “My Lord and my God.” Notice that this is not just rejoicing in seeing his friend again but *praising* – he *worships* Jesus. He really has come through to faith.

John’s gospel is sensory – hearing seeing, touching and experiencing are important to John. He emphasizes the necessity for a real, tangible relationship with Jesus, not just a cerebral assent, though this is important too.

Jesus goes on to say ‘because you have seen me you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.’ That’s us. There was Mary and her testimony, the disciples and their testimony, Thomas and his expression of faith, there is the gift of the Holy Spirit, there is the word of God the Bible... There is us.

We may not have physically seen Jesus as the disciples had with our physical eyes – but we have experienced him through the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church, the Body of Christ. We have experienced him through the Spirit that Jesus sent.

Blessed are we who have read the Word of God, put on paper by the inspiration of the Spirit; blessed are we who have heard the testimony of others, blessed are we who have pondered creation in the light of the author of it all, in awe and wonder, blessed are we who have wrestled with uncertainty in the face of the world’s brokenness – and have believed.

What exactly does this blessed mean? Well it means to be made holy, consecrated, set apart for God’s glory, and secondly it means to be endowed with divine favour and protection. A third meaning is that it is being given joy and relief by God’s grace in contrast to what has previously been experienced – or perhaps, to be honest, what is still being experienced. We were not promised an *easy* life!

The word in, for example, the sermon on the mount for blessed, you know the ‘*be* attitudes’, *makarios*, is a contentment that is ‘self-contained’, it is not dependent on anything external. ‘A peace which passes all understanding’. Never mind what is going on around us. Trust and obey.

Blessed are those who believe. The disciples *did* believe; the stories John had written tell us of that before this encounter. But these disciples, the first

believers if you like, needed encouragement, they doubted – lacked trust. Compare with us – they did *not* have 2000 odd years of testimony, of teaching or lots of different versions of the whole Bible including the new testament with the records of Jesus' resurrection.

We still need encouragement. Life is hard sometimes, discipleship is hard. As I say thanks to IT and social media as well as the press we know so much of the horrors of our fragmented and hurting world. (Not that horrors are new, as the first disciples had to endure the loss of their beloved friend and rabbi Jesus amid the awful oppression of the Romans etc etc.) So the friends of Jesus found themselves fearful (even hope does not eliminate fear), uncertain even though they'd experienced the risen Lord. We are no different. We have the witness of the written word, the story of those gone before us and among us today... But common to all, we find ourselves wobbling, doubtful.

Let us encourage one another, let us remind ourselves of the faith we profess, it is good to tell our stories to one another, it is good to share the good news with those who do not yet trust and believe. It is powerful – fairly recently I was in a situation where someone who was not just doubtful but anti, and actually asked me how I came to believe in Jesus. And this at the bedside of someone terminally ill – there was an edge of scornful incredulity in the request. But I said it anyway. There were tears in her eyes.

Apparently it takes on average 8 hearings of the gospel before someone might turn to receive Christ. I remember someone saying to me, 'don't you remember those God talks we used to have at the bar?' No I didn't and it took a few more years before the penny dropped for me. Please pray for Jo that the seed would take root.

We are called to persevere. John's account ends like this: "These (stories) are written so that you may believe (trust) that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by *believing* you may have life in his name." We are blessed.

Amen