



Thomas: Doubt and Truth

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Acts 5:27-32; John 20:19-31

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What's the point of this story that the writer of John's gospel has created? It doesn't appear in any of the other gospels. Thomas may or may not have been a real person but, notwithstanding, Thomas and his doubt have entered the Western lexicon, and we all know what the phrase 'doubting Thomas' means when we hear it.

Well, there can be no doubt nor any confusion, about why John included the story in his gospel. He tells us plainly ...

"so that you may believe Jesus Christ is the son of God and that by believing you may have life in his name!"

But is that enough for us - John's story? The story of a dead man walking, as if alive! through closed doors? Does it convince us?

Overall this is a very down to earth human story that explores what many of us have felt or feel in the giddy aftermath of Easter glory. 'Doubt'. And how we can know God is present in our lives.

Remember, John is more interested in exploring theological ideas than in recording history. So for him, the scientific probability of the dead Jesus walking into a room through a closed door and inviting Thomas to put his finger into the wounds in his hand or side is of little importance compared to the theological significance of stepping into new life, with Jesus, in whom he sees the life giving spark of God.

We get hung up on the wrong things. We have spent too much time over the centuries debating the miraculous elements of the story instead of hearing them as the vehicle any good story teller might

long for to get the really important message of the story across to her readers.

This is a story, not about historical facticity, rather it is one that invites us to explore faith and doubt, evidential truth and trust, life and death and community.

John was capturing for his readers the hope and struggles they were grappling with as a community of believers about 30 years after the death of the one they had such hope in.

John offers Thomas who wants evidence. He wants to 'see' Jesus for himself before he will believe what he is being told by his friends, by the community of those who were followers of Jesus just a few weeks ago as the story sets out. Thomas wants to be convinced that Jesus death on the cross was not the end of the dynamic life that they had all been caught up in. In the story Jesus presents himself to Thomas, offering him the opportunity to test the evidence of life after death for himself. Next, when Thomas doesn't follow through on his demand to test the claim for himself, Jesus challenges Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me?" Then John has Jesus, via the person of Thomas, address all who have questioned the proposition of Jesus as Christ at that time, and through the generations that followed: *"blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believe."*

For us in the 21st century our capacity to both discern what is 'true', and to 'trust' is laid wide open. It can be difficult sometimes to discern 'truth':

- There is evidential 'truth', scientific data, that we, having seen, can believe. Contemporary science is based on this external verification.
- And today, thanks to social media and Mr Google, there is 'my' truth gleaned because I've done my research and formed my opinion - it's shaped in my head or the echo chamber of social media that I subscribe to. This might be presented as scientific data or value-based opinion
- Then there is the 'truth' we come to know through the wisdom of the ages: through the collective thought gathered together and reflected on from the experiences of communities over time, over many generations - another external source in which we can have

confidence, if you will. We can observe the enacted outcomes and implications of this value, ethical laden 'truth'.

Each of these sources of 'truth' can be problematic as we have seen during the COVID pandemic and are seeing with regard to the climate crisis and the causes of the war in the Ukraine. And they can become particularly problematic for those of us who claim to be Christian; who seek the inspiration for our lives through the stories of our sacred writings,

Sometimes the experiences of people who claim to be Christians, along with the church's formal teaching, can be quite unhelpful especially when they confuse scientific claims, as we understand that term today, with metaphorical truths and wisdom teachings; when 'my' personal truth is prioritised over communally tested truth that has been distilled over time - whether scientifically based or wisdom based.

I was talking with someone this week and noting, that if what you are being asked to believe is contrary to contemporary scientific understanding, then think again, think carefully. It might be that there is a 'truth-insight' being offered that is embedded in a metaphor or is to be drawn from the wisdom strand: often 'truth' is offered to us wrapped in the guise of myth but is no less true for that but it doesn't enquire the mental gymnastics we have often been expected to exercise to believe the impossible! Truths that carry across millennia often come to us as myth and sadly we have then a 21stC tendency to dismiss them without recognition while we argue the details of temporal historicity.

John's story of Thomas, was written for an emergent Christian community struggling, 30 years after the crucifixion, to hold to the memory of who Jesus was.

Thomas, and his demand for evidence, is a story of encouragement.

John's story is set in a moment in time, immediately after the crucifixion, the community of Jesus followers is likely in despair, their leader has been killed. Roman persecution of Jesus's followers continued, it was reasonable for them to be afraid, times were tough. Thomas it would seem doesn't want to be taken for a gullible fool so says "show me the evidence". Jesus's response on the other hand moves out beyond that closed-door occasion, beyond that moment in time and becomes timeless, moving down through the centuries,

through millennium, all the way down to us. *What then is the life we can have in Christ Jesus name?*

Last week we celebrated the resurrection of the Christ, with all the golden glory we could muster, all the splendour of word and music, all the symbols of life we could bring together. Easter Day is a magnificent celebratory ritual at the heart of the church.

Today, Low Sunday we wonder what all that was about and John points us in the direction of what we need to contemplate. *What is the life we can have in this Christ's name?*

Do we need external physical verification to assuage our doubt that a new life in Christ is open to us? Or, can we 'see' this life with the eyes of our heart and decipher its truth through metaphor and myth? Can we have faith in the truth claim that has come to us through the distilled wisdom of generations of our forebears in the faith that we can have new life in Christ - that this Christ-life will have an impact on the way we live; that peace with justice is possible and we must be prepared to work for it, and to look for the work of others to align ourselves with because it is in the power of community, in the invisible strength of commitment that we will achieve what seems impossible.

Sometimes it is what is missing that gifts us shape and heft.

Sometimes it is the emptiness that defines our character.

Sometimes it is what is invisible that shows us who we are.

Sometimes it is the blank pages that tell our story when words vanish.

A spiral

A labyrinth

A sea-washed shell

Are shaped by spaces

The unique missing parts within gifting solace, gifting direction, gifting strength.

It is what can't be seen with an onlookers eye

That strengthens us, that gifts us peace,

That fills us with gratitude.