

Sermon for Sunday 24 April 2022 (The Second Sunday of Easter) – Revd Graham Naylor

John 20.19–31

Heavenly Father, bring your word to life by your Holy Spirit, the way we may understand and believe. In Jesus name we pray. Amen. Please do be seated.

And yes, the crazy curate is on the floor again, which means we're probably going to go into different territory than when I'm up there and it's a bit more formal.

If Thomas had been here today, I wonder whether he would have had a very good case for defamation. He's been libelled, and slandered; his reputation trashed in writing, and verbally, maybe from many a pulpit over the years. I think he has a good case to argue that as a result of his climactic declaration at the end of John's Gospel – I say the end, because this **is** the end of John's Gospel; we have the conclusion where the writer of John's Gospel says why he wrote it, 'that you might believe', and then we have an epilogue in John 21, the miraculous catch of fish and the restoration of Peter and so on.

But Thomas could argue that he should not be known as doubting Thomas, but confessing Thomas, or declaring Thomas. But before we look at Thomas, let's rewind a bit and come with me with a bit of sanctified imagination. If you don't think my imagination is that sanctified, just come with me in your imagination.

After Jesus' death on the cross, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus have taken Jesus' body and they've put it in a garden tomb. They were observed by some of the women disciples that have been following Jesus. Now, I don't know that they had a good opinion of the men's ability of preparing a body for burial, because for some reason they decided they were going to come back, and I think maybe they were going to come back – 'we'll do it properly' – but they couldn't do that until after the Sabbath. They bring the right spices, they plan to wrap the linen clothes maybe more tidily than the men have done in their hurry to bury Jesus' body before the end of the day of preparation.

They didn't get that opportunity to carry out the plan. They're confronted with an empty tomb, the appearance of angels, and the risen Jesus himself. They summon Peter and John to the empty tomb. They come, but they've left before Jesus has appeared to the women and the women go back and tell the disciples that Jesus is alive. But we're told in Mark, in his longer ending and in Luke's gospel this – 'the words seemed like an idle tale and the disciples did not believe them'.

Now I can't imagine that the women were quiet and calm. They didn't go back saying [quietly] 'We've seen Jesus risen.' I can imagine the women rushing back, saying [excitedly] 'We've seen Angels. When we got to the tomb, it was empty. We saw Jesus.' I think they'd be talking over each other.

The women were eyewitnesses, no doubt, if we could pardon the pun, forceful in their accounts. But women's testimonies were not considered reliable. That's the first point. So it's acceptable for the

disciples to say, 'Nah, it's a women's testimony, we're going to ignore it.' But secondly, to hear that Jesus, that they had seen, maybe from a distance, or they'd certainly heard, died on a cross, a brutal, shameful death. It's another reason why they maybe thought that this was an idle tale, that it was ridiculous and the disciples did not believe them. Remember that, and I have sympathy with them.

A couple of disciples had headed off to Emmaus. They met the risen Jesus, and they rushed back, and by evening are telling the disciples the very same thing. And the disciples say, 'Yeah, he appeared to the women, and appeared to Simon as well while they've been off on their Sunday afternoon walk.'

Now, Luke tells us that there were eleven there. So that's the twelve minus Judas. And in my imagination, I think maybe this is the point where Thomas leaves – he's had enough – because he's not present for what we hear, the first part of our reading today. John tells us that the disciples are in the room where they've met – this is likely the room where they met for the Passover just a few days before. Maybe a place where they could somehow feel close to their death threat; how many of us who've lost loved ones go to places that hold good memories? There's also a place of safety because they're locked in in fear of the Jews. And please remember when it says the Jews in John's Gospel, it means Jewish leaders, the authorities, it doesn't mean in an antisemitic way, the Jewish people. Fear because Jesus was killed as a revolutionary messianic leader, leader of a movement. And who gets killed after the leader – the followers. They had every reason to be fearful. But Thomas has left.

Now, in Matthew, Mark and Luke, Thomas is only mentioned in the list of disciples – he doesn't get any speaking parts – only in John does he get a speaking part, and then only three times. Thomas, Thomas the twin, or as the other Gospels tell us, Thomas Didymus. For those of you of a certain age – I grew up on Merseyside, so I know Knotty Ash; I know the Jam Butty Mines; I know the Diddy Men. And Thomas Didymus always reminds me of them – sorry, that's just me!

But Thomas, in some ways, we're told in John's Gospel, is like Simon Peter. He makes declarations of loyalty, and he asks questions. When Jesus suggests that they go back to Judea, to what would become the raising of Lazarus, he's already faced death threats, and the other disciples say, 'no, no, no, we can't go back there, it's too dangerous.' And who is it that says let us go also that we might die with him? Thomas – not much doubt there! And then he voices the question – Jesus is telling them where he's going to go; he's going to the Father. He's going to come back for them. Thomas says, 'We don't know where you're going, how can we know the way?' Probably all the other disciples were too afraid to ask the obvious question. Jesus responds with the well known phrase, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life.'

Loyalty to his teacher and leader. He's given up everything to follow this Jesus, and he asks the important questions. But why has Thomas left? Why has he left this upper room where they're all locked in? Was he disillusioned with Jesus, who had promised so much, this messianic leader who ended up being killed like every other messianic leader before him? Was he disillusioned with himself – like Peter when he realised he'd denied, did Thomas realise that he'd confessed loyalty, and then he'd also abandoned Jesus at the cross. Maybe he was just finding the accounts of the women, maybe the disciples coming back from the Emmaus road, just too much to cope with as he grieves for Jesus. But for whatever reason, he's gone.

And Jesus appears to the disciples, 'Peace be with you.' A common greeting, maybe as a table grace, he's about to have some broiled fish Luke tells us. But I think as well it was loaded with forgiveness and compassion. Peace be with you. It's okay. All is well. No mention of them abandoning him, but 'Peace be with you.' All is well. And then Luke and Mark, in the longer ending, tells us that Jesus challenges their fears and their doubts when he appears. He shows the wounds in his hands, his wrists, feet, his sides. He identifies himself with the evidence of the wounds and the scars.

But Thomas has left, and he's missed out on this. When the other disciples say, 'We have seen the Lord', he simply demands the same evidence that they've had. He uses quite violent language – literally, he says 'Unless I thrust my finger in the mark of the nails and thrust my hand in his side, I will not believe.' That's pretty brutal language, but can you imagine the turmoil of Thomas? He's grieving for Jesus, the one who he loyally follows. And here are some of his friends saying 'He's risen. It's okay.' Wouldn't we have a bit of a violent reaction to that? But I think Thomas has been maligned with this – he's not asking for anything more than the other disciples had had, hence my argument that he could be argued for defamation, for being tagged as doubting Thomas.

But a week later he's offered exactly what the other disciples have had because Jesus appears again. This time he's there. Maybe they've been there for the whole week, locked in for fear of the Jewish authorities, or maybe they've gone and they've regathered the next first day of the week. And again Jesus says 'Peace be with you.' And he offers him the opportunity to do what he's asked for. He meets Thomas where he is at that moment in time, like he does for each of us. He doesn't actually say, Jesus actually doesn't say 'Do not doubt.' – there's a bit of a play of words, in Greek it's *apistos* [ἀπιστος– unbelieving] and *pistos* [πιστις – faith] – it says 'do not be unbelieving' or 'don't become unbelieving', but 'believe'. I think Jesus didn't say this (he read it beautifully, thank you!) as I've heard it so often read, Jesus with anger, 'Don't be unbelieving!'. I think he said it with gentleness, with compassion, with encouragement – 'Don't be unbelieving Thomas, be believing.'

Thomas doesn't take him up on the offer. Instead, he replies directly to Jesus, not some exclamation, but a direct response to Jesus. He replies and says to Jesus, confesses, 'My Lord and my God' – that would be blasphemy if it was not true. And Thomas here is declaring something that by John's account, the disciples the week before didn't declare – it's though the encounter the week before with the disciples is missing something. Yes, they're able to say they've met the risen Christ, but they've not declared, 'My Lord, my God.'

This climax of John's gospel, as I say, the conclusion of John is where he says 'This is the reason I've written all of this.' And then we have the epilogue. This climax brings us full circle. Did you ever notice, Thomas says, 'My Lord, my God.' What does John's Gospel start with? 'In the beginning was the Word. The Word was with God and the Word was God.' And Thomas declares, 'My Lord, my God.'

So what of us today? Jesus says that those who believe based on eyewitness testimony rather than, as Thomas and the disciples have, a first hand experience, that those who believe based on eyewitness

testimony will be blessed. Based on eyewitness testimony – that's all we have, but it's all that we have with anything to do with history, anything that we have in our news reporting, anything that we have in a court of law – eyewitness testimony – unless you were there in the first person. Can I say of Jesus, not just what the disciples the first week said, that 'He's risen.' But can we say with Thomas, 'My Lord and my God', with all the implications for the way we live our lives, can we live confessing, 'My Lord, my God'?

The question I leave you with this morning, like Thomas, can you confess, do you confess, that Jesus is my Lord and my God? You've maybe done that for years. Maybe you haven't. If you haven't. If you wonder what that means, then come and grab me after coffee, love to have a chat with you, or grab Revd Steven. What it means not just to say that Jesus is risen, but he is my Lord and my God. Amen.