

REFLECTION Thomas the doubter

Thomas wasn't present the first time Jesus appeared to the disciples. He wants evidence. He's not going to accept these fantastic stories as factual without seeing the evidence for himself.

When Jesus comes a week later and appears to the disciples, he talks directly to Thomas. The beginning is first his greeting

...Peace be with you

His tone in addressing Thomas has no note of judgement or condemnation, but is rather a tone of understanding and compassion.

...Put your finger here. See my side. see my hands. reach out your hand and put it in my side. Don't doubt, but believe.

Being known as the Doubter could quite as easily have been anyone of a number of people immediately following the Crucifixion -- or even you and me.

What would you have done, if you had been in Thomas's place?

Just think about it!

This charismatic teacher who inspired you to follow him for three years, the man you fervently believed was going to deliver you from the tyranny of the Roman occupation, the man who promised you such a glorious future...was...DEAD... crucified, and worse, killed at the instigation of your own people.

Along with all your friends you have been hiding out, meeting in a house with the doors locked, terrified for your life. After all, if they can kill Jesus, you could be next.

But then... when you return to the house that day, the other disciples try to tell you they've seen Jesus alive. You know for sure you and your friends buried him in the tomb. How can he be alive? How can you believe it unless you see him for yourself? Just like the others claim they have.

In Thomas' defence, Jesus' other friends hadn't believed it either.

- The women who went to anoint the body in the tomb did not believe it.

Mark tells us,

...they fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid...

In Luke's account,

...the women told all this to the eleven...But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them...

In John's account,

when the women tell the disciples that Jesus' body has been removed from the tomb, they do not believe it. They immediately set out to see for themselves.

- When Jesus appears to Mary in the garden, she does not recognise him, even when he asks her what is wrong. She had seen him crucified. She does not expect to see him alive. It is only when Jesus calls her name that she knows him.

Jesus said to her 'Mary! She turned and said to him 'Teacher''

- Then Jesus appears to the disciples.

...when it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them, and said, 'Peace be with you'. After he said this, he

showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord...

- And later, following Thomas' encounter, Jesus showed himself again to the fishermen disciples by the Sea of Tiberius. Peter, Thomas, Nathaniel, James and John and two others had been out fishing all night but had caught nothing. Just after daybreak Jesus approaches them and tells them to cast their net on the other side of the boat. And now they can't haul the net in because there are so many fish! It is only then that Peter recognises Jesus. And again, only after they had been given a material sign.

So, when Thomas said,

...unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe..

was he really reacting any differently to the other disciples? Or from what we might have done?

The disciples must have been filled with such despair. Not just because Jesus had been killed, but disappointed in themselves. In his darkest hour, they had deserted him, denied knowing him.

And they were terrified they would be found guilty by association and suffer the same fate as Jesus.

But then suddenly, somehow, into that room filled with despair and hopelessness, Jesus appeared and stood there among them. They could hardly believe what they were seeing, so Jesus showed them the wounds in his hands and his side.

And then he showed them something even more incredible than his physical wounds. He showed them God's amazing grace.

There were no recriminations. Jesus continued to love them without judgment.

- he didn't show disappointment in them
- he didn't condemn them for their weakness and failure to stand up for him
- he didn't ask them why they were hiding behind locked doors
- he didn't say anything at all about their fears

All he said was, 'Peace be with you'.

But Thomas was not with them when Jesus came. So, when the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord", he didn't believe them. When we look at the whole story, Thomas is not the only one who has doubts. But maybe he is the only one who *expresses* his doubts.

Now we read, a week later, the disciples were again in the house, and this time Thomas was with them. Again, Jesus came and stood among them and said, '*Peace be with you*'.

Then he reached out and addressed Thomas,

...put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.

Can we see this doubting aspect of Thomas, not so much as a negative, but more as a positive trait; as an inquiring mind that needed to see the truth to believe, but was more than willing to believe once he saw the truth.

Rev Andrew Prior, a Uniting church minister in South Australia says,

We are not forbidden to doubt. Doubt is a means of growing and maturing. There would be something odd about a person who really did not doubt...The question is whether, despite our inevitable and healthy doubts, will we trust. Will we trust God enough to act upon what we understand to be true? Will we trust God that even in this desperate and crisis ridden world, there can still be harmony and good? Will we act to live out "Peace be with you"?

Can we see Thomas not so much as one who doubted, but someone who found it difficult to trust? When Jesus confronted him in that room, Thomas immediately responded,
...My Lord and my God!

I know at times we can all identify with Thomas. We have doubts and we want to know something for ourselves. No one's word is good enough but we need to see for ourselves. Is this not having faith? Not so! What faith is greater; the one that never doubts, or the faith that doubts and questions and investigates - and believes.

So, we could regard Thomas, not as a doubter, but as someone who needed to find out for himself; needed to believe not because of other men's words but because he found God for himself.

But Jesus also said,

...blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe

As we know, because we've read the rest of the story, something happened to those fearful disciples we have just been hearing about. Just a few weeks later, at Pentecost, emboldened by the Holy Spirit, they not only appeared out in the open, they spoke out boldly, proclaiming the risen Christ.

Also buried in this story is the directive of Jesus to the disciples,

...As the Father has sent me, so I send you..

And he breathed on them and said to them,

...receive the holy spirit...

Here is a new beginning. The Spirit, the helper, will help the disciples lay the claim of Jesus before the people.

When Thomas makes his crowning confession of Jesus:

My Lord and My God

Jesus responds with,

Now you believe – now that you've seen!

Blessed are those who have not seen, but who believe.

AMEN.