

# It's good to question .....

*... essential, even.*

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*A sermon given on the second Sunday of Easter, 16th April 2023 – by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster*

*John 20:19-31*

So what do Doubting Thomas, climate change deniers, christian fundamentalists, anti-vaxxers and Donald Trump's supporters all have in common? You're probably sitting there thinking, 'Oh dear, what's he going to say now?' Well, the answer is that they all have a problem with trust. Climate change deniers and anti-vaxxers don't trust the scientific establishment; Donald Trump supporters don't trust government institutions or the media; christian fundamentalists and Doubting Thomas (at least in the first part of this story) both have mistaken trust for certainty, and therefore faith has to rest on facts and evidence. For the fundamentalist, it's important that every word of the Bible is actually true, factually true, and that you can prove the reality of the resurrection by sheer thought of argument and reason. They want to remove any element of uncertainty. In effect, they don't want to actively trust God, they just want to rely on the facts. And this, I think, is a more general problem in the modern world. On the one hand, people in the Western world today have a deep desire for certainty - we want to know where we are. We've been taught over the last 300 years that scientific knowledge provides the royal highway to truth and that science can give you certainty. On the other hand, people have also discovered that the institutions which pretend to offer the truth, whether it's government or media or police or even the universities and scientific establishments themselves, they all of them have their own agendas and are suspected of using their knowledge as a way of holding on to power and excluding others. So we find ourselves in the double-bind of both thirsting for certainty and being suspicious of those who presume to offer it. And the result is an explosion of conspiracy theories and suspicion of experts and the fueling of polarised culture wars and a scepticism that there can even be such a thing as real truth. At best, there is just your opinion and mine. And in such a climate, being sceptical is seen as a mark of being mature and wise.

But there is a fine line between having a healthy scepticism and just being paranoid.

When we stand up and recite the creed together saying 'We believe in one God', it's easy to think that we are simply saying we believe that God exists, in the same way we might say we believe in the Loch Ness monster or in ghosts or in UFOs. But it's not so much a statement of fact as a statement of trust. 'We believe in one God' is a way of saying we believe that we can trust God; we believe that God is working for our good and not according to some hidden

agenda that will make us lose out; it's a declaration of our commitment. The opposite of we believe in God is we are suspicious of God and mistrustful of his true intentions. And the story of Doubting Thomas in the Gospel reading this morning, is the story of someone discovering what belief really is. So when the risen Jesus stands before Thomas and says, *"Do not doubt, but believe"*, he's not saying, *"Thomas, stop denying that as a matter of scientific fact and historical accuracy, I am standing here in front of you"* - he's saying, rather, *"Thomas, you can trust me, and you can trust me, because I'm the same person that I always was; I'm the same Jesus who invited you to follow him; the same Jesus who broke bread with you and opened the scriptures with you; the same Jesus who spoke words of peace and forgiveness to you - and you can live as if I'm always going to be here with you doing those things."*

And for Thomas at that moment, the penny drops. So his response is not, *"Oh, so it really is you"*, and it's not, *"I agree with the accuracy of your statement"*. Nor, interestingly, does Thomas respond to Jesus's invitation to put his fingers in the wounds and his hand in his side, even though Thomas has been invited to do so. Rather, Thomas's response is to say, *"My Lord and my God"* - the first time anyone in the New Testament attributes divinity directly to Jesus. It's the response of pure faith showing that Thomas is willing and prepared to base his life on the assumption that Jesus will always be there - calling; nourishing; opening God's word; forgiving; and blessing. Thomas has understood that faith isn't about achieving intellectual certainty. Plenty of people saw Jesus's miracles but didn't believe in him. The letter of James says, the demons believe there is a God, and they shudder. The question is whether belief includes trust, the ability to rely on God and live as if God is present and has a good purpose for us.

And that's what changes lives. That's what Thomas discovered. That's what makes you a Christian. That's the good news of Easter and of Christ's resurrection.

So let's not get too hung up on trying to be certain about everything. It's good to question - essential, even. It's good to keep open the possibility that we may be wrong.

But don't let that prevent us from making our commitment to the risen Lord. Don't avoid trying to live as if it is true that Jesus is risen, because that holds open the door of faith through which God's forgiveness and peace and truth can flow.

When Mary first goes to Jesus's tomb on Easter morning, she finds it not quite empty because there are two angels there, one where the head of Jesus would have lain, and one at the feet. And the positioning of the angels evokes the statues of the cherubim in the Holy of Holies, in the Jerusalem Temple - that place which was above anywhere else on earth, was supposed to be where God was present. Both the Holy of Holies and the tomb were of course empty, apart from the angels.

And Mary and Thomas are like the two angels bookending the absence of the risen Lord, one on either side of the tomb: Mary can't find Jesus's body and goes looking - she sees him, but doesn't recognise him - and then Jesus tells her not to touch him; Thomas, like Mary, doesn't at first see the risen Lord, and when he does see Jesus, he's invited to touch, but he doesn't need to. Mary goes off to tell the disciples, "I have seen the Lord", but Thomas's story ends with Jesus saying, "*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe*". So do you see the contrast? Mary sees, but mustn't touch; Thomas is invited to touch, but it's those who haven't seen who are commended for their faith.

The most powerful kind of knowledge is that which changes us. And that comes when we believe in the trustworthiness of the One inviting us to have faith. So this morning, as we gather at the Lord's table, come, touch, and see the bread and wine. It's not much to behold. It doesn't of itself prove anything, but it opens the door to faith. You may not straightaway recognise the Lord, but as you come forward in faith, receiving the bread and the wine this morning, you'll be opening your life to God's presence. You'll be opening your life to God's forgiveness and peace. And you'll be opening your life to the knowledge that the Lord is risen and is with you forevermore.

# Reading Texts

## John 20:19-end

<sup>19</sup> 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.'<sup>20</sup> After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.<sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'<sup>22</sup> When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.<sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'<sup>24</sup> But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.<sup>25</sup> So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, '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.'<sup>26</sup> A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'<sup>27</sup> Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.'<sup>28</sup> Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!'<sup>29</sup> Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'<sup>30</sup> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.<sup>31</sup> But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.