



Second Sunday after Easter

Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright



16 April 2023

READINGS

Acts 2:14a, 22-32; Psalm 16; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31

Thomas the Sceptic

Easter greetings to all! This Sunday's Gospel sees the well-known encounter of "doubting Thomas" with the risen Jesus. It is a theologically rich passage. The scene is set such that one can cut the tension with a knife. The disciples had, three days prior, endured the most ghastly and traumatic of events. Not only had their political aspirations, their hopes for a liberated Israel, the creation of God's kingdom on earth, not only had all these hopes and aspirations been obliterated but, in conjunction with this, their leader, their teacher, their master, had suffered the most brutal of deaths at the hands of the Romans.

If this weren't bad enough, they were now fugitives, they are enemies of the state, the same Roman state which had so brutally murdered their master. They were fugitives both by virtue of their association with Jesus and also because, as apparently had been predicted by the Chief Priests and Pharisees, someone ostensibly had stolen Jesus' body and the disciples were the main suspects.

And so they go into hiding, they find a secure room, secreted away in some backend of town and make sure the doors are locked at all times. They can't venture outside, and they can't make any noise. They are far too anxious and they must evade detection at all costs. It is within this scenario that the Risen Jesus appears, famously allaying their fears by a word of peace. He also breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Was he an apparition? Was he a spirit? The scenario, as it unfolds, and the encounter with Thomas, stresses the corporality of Jesus, that he actually was a physical body. But then John seems a bit confused because he also highlights the fact that Jesus can walk through walls. Maybe he is something of a mixture of the two. Of all the Gospels, perhaps Luke's account goes to the greatest lengths in stressing Jesus' corporality, for here Jesus says, "See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." (Luke 24:39) And then after saying this, Jesus asks for food and eats a piece of broiled fish in the presence of the disciples.

In any event, in returning to Thomas we find a strange thing. Where was Thomas during that initial encounter in the locked room? Had he gone out to buy milk? A pack of smokes? Perhaps maybe for a gentle stroll and some fresh air? So there is a stubborn cynicism or pessimism that comes through in Thomas. If you consider his previous utterances in John, both appear cynical or negative. After Lazarus' death in John 11, when Jesus has said that he was going to Bethany to see Lazarus, Thomas enjoins the

disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." (John 11:16) Now this may seem like a virtuous comment, or it may come across as sarcastic and nihilistic.

Then in John 14:5 in the context of the Farewell discourse, after Jesus has informed the disciples he will soon be departing from them, and Jesus reassures the disciples that they indeed know the way to the place he is going, Thomas replies, "Lord, we don't [even] know where you are going. How on earth could we know the way?" (paraphrased). And this negativity, or cynicism comes out most sharply in today's Gospel reading.

If indeed Thomas was not with the twelve when Jesus first appeared to them in the locked room, this indicates his utter resignation already at this point. One who was sceptical to begin with about the mission and ministry of Jesus, has had all his suspicions confirmed – it was all along a futile and pointless exercise. Unphased by the possibility capture by the Romans, Thomas has no interest in remaining with the twelve. And even after returning to them and hearing their reports about their encounter with the risen Christ, Thomas, unsurprisingly remains sceptical. And although Thomas eventually does come to faith, he meets the risen Christ, touches his wounds, and confesses faith in Christ as his Lord and his God, his cynicism or scepticism has put him at a disadvantage.

You see John, in his characteristically different fashion compared to the Synoptics, does not agree with the Lukan account in terms of the issuing of God's Holy Spirit. For John, the Spirit does not descend on the disciples 50 days after the Resurrection, but rather on the day of the Resurrection itself. John's Pentecost, or issuing of the Holy Spirit, occurs at that first meeting in the locked room, a meeting in which Thomas was conspicuously absent. Does this mean Thomas did not receive the Holy Spirit according to John? I'm not sure.

But again, diverging from the Synoptic tradition, the issuing of the Holy Spirit for John, does not mean fantastic tongues of fire alighting upon the disciples, or the ability to speak in supernatural languages, it is connected primarily with forgiveness of sins, viz. the Holy Spirit empowers the disciples with the liberating force of forgiveness. We are all entitled to exercise a certain degree of scepticism. Perhaps one would say it is prudent and necessary to exercise some scepticism. But if you allow it to, scepticism can quickly become a permanent outlook and a way of life. In the cautionary tale of "doubting Thomas" therefore, let us not remain sceptics – "do not doubt but believe." (John 20:27b)

Amen.