

Doubt is not the Opposite of Faith (Second Sunday of Easter, 19 April 2020)

In the days after the Resurrection, we read of several occasions when Jesus appeared to his followers: to Peter and to Mary and the other women, then to the disciples in the locked room and then, eight days later, to Thomas.

It's unfortunate that Thomas earns the label 'Doubting Thomas'. It's always affected my view of this gospel account, causing me to read judgment or conflict into the conversation between him and Jesus. When we read the gospel passage, however, we notice that with one key difference – his desire to actually touch the wounds – Thomas was given the same experience the other disciples had: 8 days later, once again the frightened disciples were sheltering behind locked doors. In the same way as before, Jesus mysteriously appeared, with the same greeting: "Peace be with you." Even in his first appearance, Jesus showed the disciples his hands and his side in order that they may believe.

This time all was the same, until the resurrected Jesus revealed that he knew what Thomas had said to the others. Jesus echoed Thomas's own words by saying, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." And Thomas replied with the ultimate expression of belief, "My Lord and my God!" taking our collective faith into a deeper understanding of what the resurrection means. Christians are comfortable with equating Jesus with God, but it was a new leap of faith and courage to make this acclamation in those early days of fear and confusion.

I've been thinking about Jesus' tone in his words, "Stop doubting and believe." It always sounded to me like scolding or impatience with so-called Doubting Thomas, but what if Jesus said it with gentleness? As an invitation. With complete understanding. Jesus knew what Thomas needed, and so allowed uncertainty to flow into belief: for Thomas and for us. "Thomas the Bold: needed to ask the question we would have asked, so that we could also believe.

When Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed," he wasn't opposing Thomas's doubt to our faith. Doubt is not the opposite of faith. The two can co-exist. There are different ways of knowing: in the head, in the senses, in experience and in a combination of these. Experience is a way of knowing that doesn't cancel out doubt; it transcends it. Faith recognises there is more here than we can grasp. There is awe and mystery here that we must respond to. In the words of preacher Charles Roydon, "God is bigger than the measure of our minds; we cannot contain God within our imagination or understanding ... and God is all the more to be worshipped for that." This account of Thomas is an example.

In the locked room the disciples were commissioned and empowered to continue Jesus' ministry, not by their own confidence or talents, but by the spirit that the resurrected Jesus breathed into them. After Jesus' earliest followers had all died, it was impossible to know the historical Jesus. But it was and is possible to know the Easter Jesus. Jesus' promise to be present with us at all times became a lived truth for these disciples, and so for us. By his experience Thomas was also commissioned and empowered to take the news of the Risen Christ as good news for all. In Christian tradition, Thomas the apostle is the patron Saint of India, where he founded seven churches.

How do believers today share the same encounter with this Easter Jesus – one that allows us to continue his message and mission? How do we awaken to Jesus breathing in and through us?

In those first days the disciples learned that the resurrection does not deny the reality of death or dissolve our fear of death. So like them, we bring our questions, our doubt and even our fear.

The Easter Jesus, the risen Christ, comes to us with scars. They are proof of his victory over death, but also reminders of his humanity. He has entered fully into the human experience, identifying with our suffering, placing the message of his death and resurrection into the story of God's love. An encounter with Jesus doesn't follow a script. It happens uniquely for each of us, but it lies in vulnerability, recognising Jesus' woundedness and our own, and like Thomas does, daring to reach out to him, and allow ourselves to be touched by him.

Wounds are signs of our humanity. We don't ignore, deny or numb the pain of the world or our own pain, but we know the self-giving love of the Christ – the one whose body was broken for us. When we understand that the resurrected Jesus appears to us on earth with his scars, we can get real about our own. We can experience the mystery of the resurrection and respond to that truth which is greater than human knowledge with the words, "My Lord and my God". This is the source of our faith that can speak of hope in a place of despair and life in the face of death.

This year it is apt to share with you a poem written during the first world war. It is titled 'Jesus of the Scars' (Edward Shillito, 1872 – 1948).

If we have never sought, we seek Thee now;
Thine eyes burn through the dark, our only stars;
We must have sight of thorn-pricks on Thy brow;
We must have Thee, O Jesus of the Scars.

The heavens frighten us; they are too calm;
In all the universe we have no place.
Our wounds are hurting us; where is the balm?
Lord Jesus, by Thy Scars, we claim Thy grace.

If, when the doors are shut, Thou drawest near,
Only reveal those hands, that side of Thine;
We know to-day what wounds are, have no fear,
Show us Thy Scars, we know the countersign.

The other gods were strong; but Thou wast weak;
They rode, but Thou didst stumble to a throne;
But to our wounds only God's wounds speak;
And not a god has wounds, but Thou alone.