

What Evidence Do You Require?

John 20:19-21; 24-31

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the disciples had gathered together and locked the doors of the place because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. So Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. Just as the Father has sent me, I also send you."

Now Thomas (called the "Twin"), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he replied, "Unless I see the wounds from the nails in his hands, and put my finger into the wounds from the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will *never* believe it!"

Eight days later the disciples were again together in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and examine my hands. Extend your hand and put it into my side. Do not continue in your unbelief, but believe." Thomas replied to him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are the people who have not seen and yet have believed."

Now Jesus performed many other miraculous signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

SERMON

Rene Descartes, the famous French Philosopher and Mathematician, said "*I doubt therefore I think; I think therefore I am*"! Those present here who - like myself - have been trained in the sciences will have been expressly encouraged to doubt. We never take things on face value, but will question and scrutinise, will think of alternative explanations for our observations. As such I have a great affinity with the scepticism of the man who goes down in history as "doubting" Thomas. It is sad that many Christians are tormented by this story because, they think, Jesus is actually reprimanding Thomas and that therefore *to doubt is to sin*. In contrast, Descartes thought that doubting was the way to *truth*!

Let me say at the outset, the notion that *to 'doubt is to sin'* is not, I don't think, John's intention for including this resurrection appearance in his gospel. What John is doing is bringing themes together from earlier in his gospel and creating a literary climax. Just before today's reading Jesus meets Mary Magdalene, who initially mistakes him for the gardener - but once he says her name, she knows it is Jesus. She then runs to the other disciples exclaiming (v18) "*I have seen the Lord!*" The disciples are no better than Thomas - they don't believe her and John does not tell us why. We don't know of course, but perhaps John is contrasting Mary's temperament and the analytical personality of Thomas, showing that the risen Jesus reveals himself to all kinds of people.

Later, Jesus' grieving followers met together in a secure place because they were afraid. We need not read too much into whether the doors were simply shut or locked (the Greek can mean either). John is not claiming that Jesus' resurrected body can dematerialise and re-materialise through walls like a Star Trek teleporter, rather closed doors are no obstacles to the risen Christ - *you just can't keep him out!*

Jesus then greets them: Peace be with you - "*shalom*" - the standard rich Hebrew greeting meaning "be in a state of peace, with restored relationships, of wholeness and wellbeing". This greeting echoes the phrase John gives earlier (14:27): "*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you*" says Jesus, "*I do not give it to you as the world does. Do not let your hearts be distressed or lacking in courage*". John tells us that Jesus then showed them his hands and his side, and the disciples *rejoiced* when they recognised it was the Lord. Again John's readers would have recalled what Jesus tells his disciples in Chapter 16:22 - "*you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you*". These two promises of peace and joy are fulfilled by the end of the Gospel.

And with that joy and excitement the disciples of course tell Thomas "*we have seen the Lord*" - exactly what Mary had told them. Guys, when are we finally going to get it - that 'women are always right!'

However, Thomas is not impressed; he does believe it. He wants hard evidence – some might call it *proof* – without which he will *never* believe.

How does Jesus respond to Thomas' well-known bold assertion? Jesus *invites* the scrutiny, the examination – in this case of his wounds. It is not sacrilege to question, seek evidence, to require convincing. Here is the *evidence you stipulated*, says Jesus and he shows him his hands and side for Thomas to examine.

John tells us that Jesus met the conditions that Thomas set for his belief. After giving Thomas what he asks, Jesus makes this logical exhortation: "*do not be unbelieving, but believing*", or "*do not be faithless, but faithful*" – the word 'doubt' is not in the Greek (despite being in the NIV). What Jesus says, according to John, is this: "*do not continue in a state of unbelief when all the evidence demands belief*." Jesus is not shaming or reprimanding Thomas for doubting, rather he gives Thomas what he needs for faith. Jesus giving an individual what he or she needs for faith is a feature of John's gospel: The Samaritan woman at the well (John 4), the healing of the man born blind (John 9), the raising of Lazarus (John 11), and so on. As we will see in a moment, that is a key aspect of John's gospel agenda.

But the story does not stop there. John tells us earlier of Thomas's blunt honesty and enquiring mind. In John 14:5-7, *Thomas said, "Lord, we don't know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus replied, "I AM the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you have known me, you will know my Father too"*.

On the one hand, Thomas' direct question gets what may seem a cryptic reply, one that indirect and not understood by Thomas at the time. Never mind about "I think therefore I am" (!), This reply is one of John's great "I AM" statements which good Jews would have understood as linking Jesus' identity with the God's own name that God revealed to Moses – "I AM who I AM" (YHWH) – so holy a name that no Jew would ever utter it.

Thomas' response in this resurrection appearance is "my Lord and my God". 'Lord' and 'God' are the two Hebrew words for God (YHWH and Elohim). Thomas recognises *God fully revealed in Jesus*. His intellectual honesty may make him slow to believe, but after his encounter with the risen Christ, Thomas makes one of the most profound acclamations of faith in whole of John's gospel.

John ends his account by shifting gears and speaking directly to his reader.

"Now Jesus performed many other miraculous signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

John's purpose in his whole gospel is for his reader to get to the same conclusion as Thomas did: To see God fully revealed in Jesus and say "my Lord and my God". The purpose is not merely to believe Jesus rose from the dead – rather it is a sign of Jesus' *identity*. That Jesus who came from God's glory in John Chapter 1 has now returned to God's glory. The story is not focused on Thomas or on doubt but on affirming Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.

What do we learn from this today?

Two phrases Jesus said impressed themselves on me as I prepared this sermon.

The first phrase is: "Do not continue in your unbelief, but believe".

Jesus did not do mass appearances to compel belief; rather he appeared to individuals, to very different kinds of people - like Mary and Thomas. He did that then and I believe that by the Holy Spirit, he does that still today to anyone who genuinely seeks him.

John anticipates what his reader might have thought "that's OK for you, John, you actually saw the *risen* Christ, but how he as *ascended* we cannot have that kind of evidence." John tells us that Jesus said "Blessed are the people who have not seen and yet have believed".

What don't you believe? What evidence do you want? This need not be concerning the resurrection, but, say, evidence that God actually *loves* you – as a person, when deep down you don't believe God even cares for you. Evidence that he has really forgiven you, when your heart tells you that God is ashamed of you and you feel condemned?

Think about that: What don't you really believe in your heart? What evidence do you want God to provide to convince you otherwise? Do we have the courage of Thomas to articulate what it will take for us to believe? We will never have proof – but the concept of *proof* is an overrated idea, even in science. But Jesus will give us sufficient evidence – if we want it. That evidence may come in surprising ways, so we need to open our eyes to recognise it.

What evidence do you want?

The second phrase is simply: “Peace be with you”. Jesus used this greeting three times in this passage. Do we live in *Shalom*? With the *peace, joy and wholeness* that Christ gave to his followers in that room. Who needs to hear Jesus to them today: “*Do not let your hearts be distressed or lacking in courage, but **peace be with you***”.

Know that peace and, like the disciples, rejoice. Amen