

REDEEMING “DOUBTING THOMAS”

Nic Denny-Dimitriou - 21st November 2004

John 20:19-31

Thomas the disciple has every reason to feel put out at the way the church has remembered him. On the basis of this one story he has always been known as “Doubting Thomas”. This is a bit of a problem, not only for Thomas, but also for us, because it makes it quite hard for us to hear anything else in the story.

The fact is that Thomas is not shown to be any more of a doubter than most of the rest of the disciples, and the story is not primarily about doubt anyway, it is about the risen Christ and how he responds to our need for faith.

Let’s look at Thomas first though, and see how his doubt compared to that of his fellow apostles. Thomas is absent when Jesus turns up and shows the other disciples his hands and his feet. Now his absence may be to his credit already, because John tells us in his Gospel that the reason the rest of them were there behind locked doors is because they were afraid to go out. So maybe Thomas’ absence already suggests that he was somewhat more courageous than the rest.

Anyway, when Thomas comes back and they say they’ve seen Jesus, Thomas is incredulous. And why not? He’d seen Jesus dead. Very dead. Hung up to die and then stabbed with a spear just to make sure. Thomas is no fool. He knows death when he sees it. His mates might be somewhat gullible, but Thomas is not going to be conned. “I’ll need to see the nail marks and the hole where the spear went in before I’d be able to believe that story,” he says. Fair enough!

After all, isn’t that exactly the same reaction that the rest of the twelve had had when the women reported their experience at the empty tomb. According to Luke’s gospel (Luke 24:11), when the women told the apostles that the angels had told them that Christ had risen - it says, “the apostles thought that what the women said was nonsense, and they did not believe them.” Even if we stick just with John’s account, the disciples who are huddled fearfully behind closed doors have already heard from Mary Magdalene that she has met the risen Christ in the garden, but they’re not coming out of hiding yet.

So to single Thomas out as the doubting one looks to be seriously unfair. He was one of the doubting eleven, no worse than the rest of them, and possibly a bit braver. Perhaps the real reason why he’s singled out is simply that he was the only one who hadn’t been there the first time Jesus visited, and so in his story we see the individual version of what all the others went through collectively.

I reckon that if you were to hear the individual accounts of any of the other ten, you’d get a similar story of the reality of the risen Christ breaking through fear and doubt and evoking joy and faith. In a sense then, perhaps you could say that Thomas’ story is every disciple’s story, and that Thomas’ story is your story and my story.

Now if that's the case, what is the story telling us about this risen Christ who meets us each like he met Thomas?

Well perhaps the thing that will most immediately surprise those who are used to thinking of Thomas as "the doubter" and thinking of doubt as sin, is that Jesus does not reprimand him for his lack of faith. On the contrary, Jesus takes seriously what Thomas has said he needs to enable him to believe. Jesus offers him just what he needed.

If we think more widely about it this should not be such a surprise. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews (4:15-16) tells us that Christ is not out of touch with the reality of what we experience. He's been through weakness and testing just like us, so we can confidently walk right up to him and ask for what we need. Well that's exactly what Thomas does. He says, "Unless I see this I can't believe," and Jesus, understanding where he was at says, "OK, look, here it is."

Maybe Thomas should have been able to believe on the basis of what the other ten told him. Maybe the other ten should have been able to believe on the basis of what the women told them. They didn't, and Thomas didn't. But Jesus meets them where they are at, not where they perhaps should have been.

This is not a story of judgment and reprimand, but of hope and promise. Jesus is far more interested in whether we trust him than why. And that's why no two people's stories of faith are quite the same. Not all of us saw blinding flashes of light on the road to Damascus like Paul. None of us touched the physical wounded hands of Jesus like Thomas. Many Christians continue to experience times of doubt, and most if not all of us have questions about God and life that will remain unanswered on this side of eternity. But for each of us, Christ reached out to us in whatever way we needed to be reached for us to believe and trust Christ.

And as John makes clear at the end of this reading, although none of us after the first generation of disciples can have the opportunity that Thomas had, there has been enough written down and passed on to us by those who have gone before us in the faith to ensure that we can know what we need to know and hear what we need to hear for us to find our way of faith. "These things are written down," says John, "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."

There are of course some people who play games with this. They're always moving the goalposts, so that no matter how Christ reaches out to them, they are always demanding another sign, another miracle, another proof before they'll believe. The truth is that they're unwilling to trust and follow Christ, no matter how convinced they might be, and so there's always some further impossible proof that they claim to need before they could believe.

But that wasn't Thomas. His doubts and fears were real and when Christ broke through to him and dispelled the doubts and fears, he was more than ready and willing to fall to his knees saying, "My Lord and my God!"

In the end, those who simply play games to avoid Christ are only conning themselves. But for those of us who, with Thomas, have responded to Christ, it was something different that enabled each of us to cross the line from doubt to faith, from fear to trust. What it was doesn't really matter much now. Christ met us where we were and when we recognized him for who he was we fell to our knees and confessed him to be our Lord and true God. We may not have done it suddenly and literally like Thomas. For some of us faith almost crept up on us and we don't know when we crossed the line.

But, either way, what we do know now is that our lives are lived in ongoing confession that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God forever.