

Thomas & the Risen Jesus

John 20: 19 - 31

Sunday 1 May 2011

Thursday 12 May 2001

Thomas had probably gone home. That's probably what I would have done. I have been around grieving people, both in my professional life and amongst friends and family. Though some people like to be with a crowd of family and friends, sometimes you just need to get out and be alone awhile.

That's quite likely what Thomas had done. Especially after Mary Magdalene came running with the story that she thought she'd seen Jesus in the garden, and even Peter and John came up with some confusing stuff about an empty grave. For heaven's sake! Didn't they realise that the priests had probably taken the body to make sure they wouldn't be able to create a martyr's shrine out of it?

And wasn't it likely that a couple of friendly words from the gardener had confused a deeply grieving Mary into thinking she'd met the Lord at dawn? The grieving mind plays tricks, but this was nothing to get overly carried away about...

Or get your hopes up! After all, when you're dead, you're dead. Finished and klaar! Over and done with. They should have known; how could he ever have dreamed that Jesus and the stuff he preached stood a chance in this world?

Seeing Jesus die on the cross had probably been enough to snap him out of the hopeful and idealistic mood where he had felt anything was possible, and made him realise the sooner they dispersed and got themselves back to Galilee the better. No point in ending up on a cross as well.

I'm sure that all of us are familiar with disappointment, grief, despair – and with being disillusioned. We can imagine what was going on in Thomas's heart and mind, and in the minds and hearts of some of the disciples too.

The whole range of human reactions to grief and trauma will have played themselves out amongst them, as they do in any group of people confronted with such things. Some huddle together in silence, whether comfortably or awkwardly. Some talk compulsively. Some have deep conversations relating to the loss. Others mask what they're feeling with a smile on their face, reassuring themselves and everybody else that "all will be well".

And then, some simply prefer to be alone, to go home or go for a long walk. It all depends on who we are, and how we'd rather deal with these things and how this particular loss affects us.

Was Thomas the only one who wanted solitude? Did he grieve differently from his friends? Or was it coincidence that he wasn't around when their despair started lifting?

Whatever it was, he was not with them when Jesus appeared to them, but somewhere else. And when he returned, he responded with scepticism. He was obstinate about their excited claims. "I will believe when I see it with my own eyes" he said, "and when I feel it with my own hands..."

Faith is not only something vague, esoteric. It is more than an undefined awareness of something “spiritual” around us. Faith can also be quite physical. And it is not always quiet or tame; sometimes it can be like a raging flame, about a relationship that involves soul, body and mind.

“I want to touch him” says Thomas, “Then and only then will I believe...”

What happens is something else. Although Jesus invites him to touch his wounds, according to the text, we only read about Thomas’s reaction; it does not state that Thomas ever actually puts his hands or fingers in or on Jesus wounds. He is invited to touch, but we are not sure from the words that he actually does so.

However, he himself is touched.
Very deeply

Thomas, the Doubter, with whom so many have expressed a spiritual kinship over the centuries of re-telling the Jesus Event, is touched with a love stronger than death, with a passion fierce as the grave – like a raging flame. He was touched by the physical presence of Christ, and that’s what brought him back to life.

Thomas shows all the signs of a stubbornly rational, determined realist. So for him to have been turned around, to have been converted and brought to his knees in faith, would have taken more than just a victory of mind over matter, of blind faith over fact.

For something like that to happen, takes something that involves more than the mind or the spirit in some vague way. It takes something that burns like a raging fire, something that can’t be drowned out even by a flood of reasoning and disbelief. It takes something stronger than the conviction that death and the grave automatically have the last word. It would be something mind-blowingly and soul-changingly powerful. AND it would be physical – like being hit in the stomach, knocked on the head, swept off one’s feet...

Thomas, who had wandered off into the valley of death and did not believe in a return, discovers a hand reaching out to him through what he earlier thought was a barrier of the impossible. That hand touches him. A hand with holes in it. A hand with the marks of suffering. A hand connected to the body of One who experienced anguish and despair when the person in that body cried out, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

Thomas finds a friend right beside him who meets him where he is at. A friend who comes looking for the rational, sceptical soul who’s already made up his mind about what’s possible and what is not. A friend who finds him and gives him new life, offers him love, and shows him that even *his* emptiness can be filled, that even *his* despair can be changed into shouts of joy, that even *his* stubborn rationalism can discover... there is much more to life than the cold hard belief that persistently tells us that suffering, despair and death always have the last word.

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*In significant parts, this sermon was inspired by notes by Anneke Oppewal*