

Imagine how they felt. The terrified, grief-stricken disciples gathered together, locked behind closed doors, struggling to decide on what to do next, wrestling within themselves to make sense of all that had happened to them in the past few days.

They were hiding in fear. Their Rabbi, their Lord, the one they had so many hopes for, had been publically humiliated and had been crucified like some common thief. He hadn't shown his power and come down from the cross as they had been sure he would. They, too, faced the very real threat of being arrested and executed. And now, some of the women were telling disturbing, telling *impossible* stories of the tomb being empty. Judas had killed himself. And *where* was Thomas?

And into their midst, Jesus came and stood among them. "Peace be with you" He said. He was alive! He **WAS** alive! Joy! And peace was exactly what they needed. He showed them his hands and his side – this was no ghost, it **WAS** Jesus. They had been there when those wounds were inflicted. And the disciples rejoiced! Imagine how they must have felt. When Thomas returned, the disciples couldn't wait to tell him. "We have seen the Lord!" It is true! He is Risen!

Thomas responded with pragmatic cynicism at this unlikely news: "Oh, Please. Unless I see the mark of the nails and put my hand in his side, I will not believe." And history has judged him for that. Let's be honest here for a minute. How many of us would have said something similar? "Come off it. We *saw* him die. This is hysterical behaviour. People don't just come back to life. First the women, now you. Get a grip, face facts"

And so he gets labelled for all time as "Doubting Thomas" and he's seen as the one with little faith, the man who churlishly refused to believe. I don't think that's fair. He finds himself face to face with men he has spent the past three years with, all of whom are overjoyed and exhilarated with the news of Jesus' Resurrection. All Thomas wanted was to have the same opportunity as his fellow disciples. He wanted what they had – to see and touch the Risen Christ. To experience him.

If you look at the first three gospels, there is no mention of Thomas. It is only in John's Gospel that we are told of Thomas, which includes this story. **But** there is more to Thomas than this one event. When Jesus chose to go to Jerusalem, the disciples feared persecution and death. Yet it was Thomas, brave Thomas, who said: "Then let us go so that we may die with him." Not like Peter, who tried to turn Jesus from his fate, so much so that Jesus had to rebuke him. But do we remember Thomas for his courage or his faith?

I'd like us to look a little further, beyond the doubt of Thomas to his response to Jesus when they finally met. The disciples didn't need to tell Jesus what Thomas said. Jesus knew what Thomas had said. He didn't accuse him or humiliate him or reject him. Jesus met Thomas where he was. He provided for his needs, showed Thomas what he needed to see. He loved him and accepted him.

Jesus' acceptance freed Thomas to make his profound and earth-shattering confession of faith. "My Lord, and my God." It is uttered with conviction and utter faith. This was not conjecture for Thomas. Jesus is Lord. Fact. These are not the words of a doubting man. They are the words of a man who has moved into a deep, trusting relationship with God.

There is a story told of Francis of Assisi, who would spend long nights in a cave, alone in prayer. One night, one of his young disciples followed him to the cave, seeking to know more about what gave Francis his love for God - his passion and commitment. And the prayer that Francis prayed was simply this: "My Lord and my God, My Lord and my God". Over and over again, all night. Thomas' words. Powerful words.

So often, when I read this story, I almost feel that Thomas is there to represent me, representing all of us who have not had the chance to see Jesus standing before us in the flesh, to experience him as a solid human being in our daily lives. Thomas represents all of us who learn a little more, day by day, of how to be a follower of Christ. We didn't live alongside Jesus, sharing meals and walking dusty roads together. We have to work harder to know God, to understand this relationship we have with our Creator.

The reality is that the relationship we have with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit lies closely wrapped in our concept of God: is God for us a harsh taskmaster, a vengeful accountant, just waiting to pounce on us for the slightest transgression? Or is God for us more the father in the parable of the prodigal son, who is full of love and forgiveness, waiting to welcome us?

In Gerard Hughes' superb book, *God of Surprises*, he describes how our teachers, parents and clergy can give us a false understanding of God... p 34. (Mean Uncle George)

Our idea of God is also tied into our self-image: in so many ways, we make God in our own image, and if we punish ourselves and judge ourselves harshly, how can we accept that God is a God of limitless, boundless and unconditional love?

Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, p.107.

The fact is, often we are tempted to limit God to what we know, what we can cope with. We make God in our own image – harsh and unforgiving, narrow and restricting. But we are made in **God's** image – and the vast mystery of God calls us out of our limited human understanding.

Each of us here has a heart, two arms, two hands, two legs, and two feet. A face. Someone once told me exactly how many minerals we're made up of, and that we are also about 80% water. It's all approximately similar for every body here this morning. And yet, how different we are. Not just our fingerprints, but every combination of features is unique. Even if we're twins, as two of our congregation are, and as Thomas was – we're different. Unique.

So why do we expect our faith experience to be the same? Each of us has a different experience of faith, of spirituality, of relationship with God. That difference goes way beyond our worship preferences on Sunday mornings. Whether we prefer organ music and hymns, or we enjoy a worship group. Whether we prefer public worship or private prayer. Whether we are subdued or exuberant in our prayer. Each of us has a unique journey with God, a separate story of relationship with our Creator that is written together, day by day.

We each have had different life experiences that have shaped who we are – perhaps we have been deeply hurt and experienced unlove or neglect in the past, and perhaps that has made us cautious and we find it difficult to trust. We hold back. We wonder: can God be trusted with my life?

Or others rest, blessed, in the warm and comforting arms of God – and just trust. They know they are loved. I have a friend like that. Her childhood was warm, nurturing and affirming, and her relationship with God reflects that: utterly untroubled by doubt or pain.

What about practical matters? Are we struggling to survive, or are we in a place of relative financial and material comfort? Are we in a difficult time in our family or personal relationships? Are we dealing with grief or loss? Whether we like it or not, all these affect our feelings, our emotions, which affect our relationship with God.

There have been many ways of describing our faith journey over the centuries. Theresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Julian of Norwich, Thomas Merton, and many others have shared their understandings with us.

I have heard the spiritual journey of our lives described as a parallel to our development from childhood to adulthood, with each stage equally important and spiritually as significant. It is suggested that in our lives, we can grow beyond a simple, unquestioning, childlike faith through a time of wrestling with our faith, an adolescence of questioning, serious doubt and learning, perhaps even leaving the church for a while in reaction to a problematic religious upbringing - until we reach a time of more mature faith, where we can live within the tensions of doubt and faith. A place of knowing that there are no easy answers, but having faith nevertheless. A place of trusting God.

A place of mature faith - where we can accept that God is not fully knowable, of knowing that if God was a being we could fully understand and comprehend, a God that we could get our minds around and control and dictate to, then that god couldn't be an all-mighty God. But, above all, our knowing that we are utterly and unconditionally beloved of God, and precious beyond measure. Wherever we are on our journey.

I think the metaphor of a journey of faith from childhood into maturity is an interesting idea. It is most helpful in putting those periods of doubt and questioning in our lives into context as an essential part of spiritual growth, as opposed to sinful times of doubt or falling away.

I know people who have never made the journey, and who have an almost enviable rock-solid, childlike faith that never needed questions. And I know that in my lifetime, I've made that journey in and out of trusting, solid faith not once, but many times, depending on how I'm feeling emotionally and physically, and what is happening in my life at the time. Every now and again, I catch myself running my own life. Thinking I'm in charge, all foolish and independent. And each time, I shake my head, give my life back to God again, and take comfort in the story of the Prodigal Son.

Henri Nouwen, *The return of the Prodigal Son*, p.106.

Thomas was the first of us to experience all the challenges of faith that we have in our relationship with Jesus. The first of millions to be asked to believe, despite a lack of proof, against all the evidence of his senses. And Thomas overcame those challenges by asking to see Jesus, to know more, to experience more. But he didn't dismiss what he was told. He stopped hiding, reached out with one of the most powerful statements of faith in human history - and God, who had been waiting, ran to embrace him.

Amen.