

I like Thomas! He reminds me of myself. He reminds me of all the times people have tried to tell me things I didn't want to hear or believe. But he also reminds me of how I deal with uncertainty, fear and grief. Thomas makes me reflect on how I, and many of us, deal with news our brains don't want to accommodate.

I remember in 2020 when I first heard the idea that we might be surrounded by a potentially deadly pandemic. I had been to visit a friend in the country and had arrived back into central London on a wet and cold wintery evening. I had spent an hour on a very crowded bus with my nose in someone else's arm pit – and when I got home there was the prime minister on TV telling us that we were moving into lock down mode in the coming 48 hours. It wasn't that I didn't believe the science, rather I just didn't want it to be true. How do we live with such difficult news? And yet within a relatively short period of time we changed the way we lived and worked – and even the way we did church. I remember longing for a time when it would be 'normal' or familiar – but also being aware the from now on we will all be a little different!

Trauma – whether a pandemic, or other event changes us and our perspective.

Any of us who have experienced grief know this. That period of disbelief, when we hope that the news is not true and that the person you have lost is not really gone.

Grief can be a time of anguish. A time when it can feel that you will never be able to live with this pain – or find a way to shape a way forward. The disciples were in this pain, in this grief – wondering about what had happened and what would become of them - only to suddenly have the risen Jesus standing before them in a locked room!

Their emotions of disbelief and fear would have been extremely high. They were already fearful that others would want to kill them to shut down any stories of Jesus resurrection which were already emerging – and here – in the height of their fear – Jesus stands before them. It is no wonder that Thomas cannot believe their madness – or questions their reality.

Thomas is not really a Saint of Doubt – he is a Saint of realism and truth. He is an example especially in the Gospel of John of all those who

have been sceptical of the ministry and miracles of Jesus. Of those who asked the question ‘Really – are you sure?’ John is writing to a community who is both trying to understand who Jesus is and also how he relates to their first century context.

John the Evangelist wrote John’s Gospel with this perspective in mind. He writes for people who have heard about Jesus, and want to know more. They want enough information to be able to draw their own conclusions.¹

This pattern takes place a number of times in this Gospel – the woman at the well, Nicodemus, Mary telling the disciples Jesus is risen – there is a pattern of hearing something, but also understanding that in the end each follower, each convert needs to make up their own mind about who Jesus is – and the truth of the resurrection.

This doesn’t mean we all have to start from the beginning – but it does mean we each need to ask the questions that allow us to come to deeper understanding of who Jesus is, and how we live out faith.

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3619

The account in the Acts of the Apostles takes a similar form. It is recorded to help the emerging church understand what it means to be followers of Christ.

For some of us questions, and coming to understanding through questioning is vital. For others questions can be uncomfortable, and even seen as a challenge to authority. But the reality is - we each come to a place of faith by finding out who Jesus is; and making a decision about how we follow. This is what Thomas is doing too - who is this person who has appeared to you in the room - is it really Jesus? We should never be afraid to ask the questions that help us grow in faith or come to a greater understanding of our purpose in the world - or what God is calling to us.

So what then of Jesus statement to Thomas *"Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."*²

The truth is there are some who don't need to question - they just know. Jesus also understood that all of the disciples had needed to see him so that they might continue to share his story with conviction. He also understands that each of us

² John 20:29

learn and process in different ways. But Jesus is right, it is a blessing to have a faith that allows you to stand firm, to trust –without proof in the person. Because in fact all the generations that followed would have to do this at some level – including ourselves! We only ever see the signs, never the actual acts.

So how do we see the resurrection? What for us confirms that we too can be Easter people? When were we able to say or even believe that this story of the resurrection is powerful enough for us to be part of this story?

I think the question of where we see signs of the resurrection can be even more challenging at a time in the world's history when we are surrounded by the unknown, fear and grief. But like Thomas, so much of how we interpret the world is in what we choose to see. Much of what we face at present is overwhelming, and confusing for many – there is no way to silver coat that – but there are also amazing signs of resurrection and hope. From stories of those who are willing to challenge the rhetoric of war, to those in our own congregations who influence policy makers, to those who reassure those who are fearful, or those

who diligently pray for peace, and those who provide physical relieve to those who have lost everything. Resurrection is about life and hope, and we are surrounded by it, no matter how bad things get.

This is not a polyanna-er-ish plea to only look on the bright side, but a reality that we always face signs of Resurrection amidst the pain of death and upheaval.

Jesus appearance and resurrection did not stop the ongoing persecution of the disciples or many others in Judea and the surrounding areas. It did not stop their grief, because Jesus still left them. But it gave them hope and strength to continue to work to change the world.

The challenge of course is what we do with the news of Jesus resurrection. Over the next 5 weeks we explore different accounts of Jesus appearance until the feast of the Ascension and we hear how the disciples each responded. We hear of their courage of sharing the news. We will hear stories of how the early church grew and spread.

We will also share our frustration that the peace and justice, love and joy which Jesus envisaged and hoped for has never been fully realised. But now, maybe more than any other, we can dare to believe behaviour can change!

Maybe in the end we can take courage from Thomas. Who wasn't sure, but had the courage to ask. Who was missing when the important stuff happened but took the time to find out; and who in the end knelt before Jesus and said 'My Lord and my God! **Amen.**