

SERMON

We love to label people, don't we? Nicknames often derive from these labels, and they're not always positive.

So today we have '**Doubting Thomas**'.... forever defined by not believing what his friends told him because he was not there when Jesus appeared after the resurrection, on the evening of the first Easter Day...

This morning we'll think about *our response to Thomas*, and then about *Jesus' response* to him. And I hope we'll see that, whereas we are all too quick to define other people, and maybe ourselves, by our mistakes or failures, Jesus deals with us all in a very different way.

Firstly, to set the scene. It's the Sunday evening. All the disciples are in an Upper Room hiding from the Jewish authorities. Sticking together, uncertain what to do or where to go, fearful that their association with Jesus makes them vulnerable, they might be arrested, might even follow him to the cross...

Where was Thomas? Two possibilities: either-locked in his own private grief he couldn't bear to be with the others, *or* the only one brave enough to be out in the city that evening, while *they* were all locked indoors. We don't know.

What we do know is that people's reactions to bereavement and loss are very different. Thomas is a pragmatist, a realist, a dogged, loyal follower of Jesus.

He's mentioned twice earlier in John's gospel: in chapter 11 when Jesus returns to Judaea to raise Lazarus, a dangerous move due to previous clashes with the authorities there, and Thomas says, 'Come on. Let's go and die with him...'

Then in ch. 14, Jesus prepares his friends for his death: 'You know the way to where I'm going.' 'No we don't!' says Thomas – 'We don't know where you are going so how can we know the way?' This is Thomas, direct, honest, feet on the ground, faithful.

How do we respond to this man? I think he is very human, I see parts of him in myself, I know Thomases today..

Just think how it feels to be left out- of a party, an event, a special occasion. It matters to us to be there and these days there's an acronym, FOMO – Fear of Missing Out!

Last year we missed our own Ruby wedding celebration with the family because of Covid!

We all probably carry similar memories and many people suffered far worse in recent years.

As Thomas hears what he's missed from his elated friends, now transformed by their knowledge that Jesus really is alive...

I ask myself, how would I react?

Would I say, *'Wow! That's great! I'm so happy for you!'*

I doubt it.

Thomas' reaction, his need to see him for myself, is far more authentic. This episode helps convince me these resurrection accounts aren't made up, certainly not by the disciples to make them look good.

So picture the scene as Thomas reacts to say, Peter's exuberant greeting, *'We have seen the Lord!'*

Doubting Thomas? Or 'feet on the ground Thomas', needing to be sure before he dares to believe it can be true? What do you think?

Lets look now at **how Jesus responds to Thomas**. I think this can be summarised in three points: **he knows him, he loves him, he believes in him**.

Jesus **knows** what Thomas is like. They've spent three years together, Thomas has spoken his mind and posed the difficult questions.. When he asked 'How can we know the way', Jesus gave his astonishing answer: **I am the way and the truth and the life**. That's far from a putdown or sharp retort.

Jesus understands Thomas, his need to be sure: and uses his questions to move him on in his faith. *He still does, for us, today.*

In John's resurrection accounts we see Jesus' friends respond differently. Mary believes in the garden when she hears Jesus' voice. John himself 'sees and believes' when he finds the grave clothes in the tomb. In the Upper Room, others believe when they see him. Thomas needs to see and touch before he can believe. And Jesus' response to Thomas? He doesn't condemn him for this, doesn't write him off as faithless and useless.

The next week between must have been a hard one for Thomas. It took courage to be with the group again, the only one who hadn't yet seen the risen Lord.

Thomas' courage is honoured by Jesus, who returns, first to Thomas, and invites him to touch and see that it is him. Why?

Quite simply because **he not only knows him, but loves him**. Jesus' love for Thomas is unbreakable and unconditional, as it is for Peter who denied him, for James and John who also fell asleep when he needed them, and for all the others who ran away when the going got tough.

Jesus' love is very wonderful' we sang as children: so high, so wide, so deep' you can't get over it, under it, round it... That's why Jesus comes back, just for Thomas. Because he loves him. He has that same unbreakable, unconditional love for each of us, no matter how we may have let him down, run away, failed him, ourselves or other people. He loves us.

Finally, Jesus' response to Thomas shows us **he believes in him**. For Jesus, Thomas is not defined by failure, or lack of faith. He goes straight to him and says, 'Do not doubt but believe' which is not so much a rebuke, as a challenge for the future!

And Thomas is then the first person in the new testament to address Jesus as God 'My Lord and my God' he declares, probably falling at his feet as he does so. We're not told whether or not Thomas actually touched Jesus – perhaps he no longer needed to.

Jesus, then, knows Thomas, loves him and believes in him. He answers Thomas' questions not with an explanation but with himself, an encounter which utterly restores his relationship with Thomas and inspires and energises him for the future- for the rest of his life in fact.

Tradition tells us that after the Day of Pentecost, when all the disciples including Thomas, were filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, Thomas went to Egypt with Mark. Then he is said to have travelled to India, landing at Kerala and founding the church of South India which exists to this day. Thomas was persecuted and martyred late in the first century. His grave in Southern India is still a place of pilgrimage. He's not 'Doubting Thomas' in India!! We sometimes call today 'Low Sunday', but in the Roman Catholic and Eastern churches it's the feast day of St Thomas!

I read a book by Edgar Dowse, a wise new testament teacher and speaker, who commented thus on this passage:

The disciples had to be sure, otherwise they would have had no gospel to preach.

We may have many questions and no easy answers or explanations. That is fine. The further I travel in life and faith, the more questions I have too. But this passage shows us that what was true for Thomas is true for us:

Jesus knows us, loves us, believes in us.

And the answers he gives will be what we need to be sure- whether it's physical proof, or the sound of his voice, or the encouragement and love of others. He is very unlikely to provide scientific or rational explanations for that which is spiritual and beyond our human understanding.

But he does come among us and say 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you'.

And we too can receive, can breathe in, the precious gift of his Holy Spirit who guides, inspires and equips us to be and share the good news of our risen Saviour.

Lets pause now and do just that. Amen.