*27th April 2025*John 20.19-31
Psalm 150

 **The man who missed Easter** *Gracious God,
May your Living Word come to us afresh this morning. So, touch, we pray our minds and hearts with your grace and truth.
Through Christ our Lord and in the power of your Spirit. Amen*

Well, here we are on the Sunday after Easter and for the next few weeks our readings take us to those post resurrection moments as Jesus meets up with his disciples, and passages where the meaning behind the empty tomb is explored.

There are seven weeks of Eastertide, and it’s sometimes noted that it’s a week longer than the six weeks of Lent. Of course it’s a season of rejoicing, yet it has to be said that these post Easter readings show us just how confusing the disciples found those early days after the Resurrection. They struggled. Mary, for example, didn’t recognise Jesus in the garden, the Emmaus Disciples were not initially aware of who their travelling companion was, and even as he cooks breakfast on a beach, apart from Peter, no one seems to know who this Jesus is.

So, these meetings were important as missing parts of the jigsaw were slowly and gradually put into place during those days between Easter and Ascension.

And no day was more important than the Sunday after Easter when Jesus meets Thomas.

We know a fair bit about Thomas, way more, in fact, than we know of many of the other disciples. He was a twin. He was also courageous in that he advocated Jesus go down and see Mary and Martha when Lazarus was ill, even though he knew they might all be in danger from the Roman authorities, and even though all his fellow disciples disagreed with him. So, I sense Thomas had never been a ‘yes’ man, instead he knew his own mind and voiced his own opinions. He might have been a team player, but he didn’t rely upon a herd instinct.

Perhaps, alongside Peter, Thomas appears very human to us. More than just a name on the Apostolic list. And as is often the case, it’s his frailty and fallibility that we seem to identify with the most.

He’s the man who missed Easter. We don’t know why but that’s what John records. Maybe he was visiting his twin. Maybe after the trauma of Good Friday he needed family. We don’t know, but it doesn’t stop us wondering why he wasn’t with the others on the evening of the first Easter Day.

So, naturally, they tell him what he’d missed. And as they told him they expected him to take on board their words and get excited. Weren’t their words enough for him? Well, no. His view was that all of this would only make sense to him if he too met with the risen Christ. It wasn’t enough for him to piggyback on someone else’s faith, he wanted his own. I don’t think this is the position of a stubborn sceptic but of an active seeker after truth.

So, what happened a week on from Easter as the disciples reconvened once more behind closed doors but this time with Thomas the Twin in attendance? John says Jesus came to them again. And now there is the encounter that changed Thomas’ life.

Jesus speaks directly to him. It’s often translated *Be unbelieving no longer but believe.* Yet, those words can also read in English, *Be faithless no longer, but be faithful.*

Belief and faith are two words we often use interchangeably, as if they inevitably mean the same thing.

There’s no doubt there’s a lot of similarity between them. Yet, maybe, belief is a bit more clinical than faith. To say *I believe* is to sign up to a Creed, to sign, as it were on the dotted line. Maybe after a period of reflection it’s time to nail our colours to the mast and say *I believe.* We often do this in Rites of Passage in church, say at a Baptismal Service, Reception into Membership or ordination as an Elder.

Yet to say I have *faith* might be to add experience to belief, it might even on occasions be to add doubt to belief. To doubt, to question, to explore might change my belief but it doesn’t necessarily mean losing my faith. Faith is never static, it ebbs and flows, changes and evolves. Faith is dynamic, it lives with ups and downs. Faith somehow blends belief and life together.

I’d like to think Jesus knew Thomas’ heart that Sunday evening in the room behind locked doors. He knew Thomas, like all of us, was on a journey of faith. Jesus knew this about all the disciples and isn’t this why when he meets them time and time again after the Resurrection his greeting is always *Be not afraid.* He came not to judge and scold them for their panicked confusion but to draw alongside them and help them take the next step of faith.

Perhaps Pope Francis will be remembered best as the Pope who so wanted to emphasise the grace and mercy of God. Many of his homilies were on the theme of forgiveness and our need to receive it and our responsibility to offer it. Francis was a pastor who knew we all need grace, mercy and forgiveness in our lives and we thank God for his humble leadership that so reflected the love and mercy of God.

And so, a week on from Easter Jesus draws alongside Thomas in that same spirit of love and grace, and Thomas’ faith grows as a result of that encounter.

Giving someone a nickname is often very selective on our part and covers just a single characteristic of their multi-faceted personality. So, ever since that first Sunday after Easter it's been Doubting Thomas yet, of course, it’s only half the story. The other half is that tremendous affirmation of faith exclaimed by Thomas as he says: *My Lord and my God!* It’s one of the fullest and deepest declarations made by any of Jesus’ disciples in the New Testament. Thomas goes from doubting to daring. Daring to publicly call Jesus both Lord and God. Words full of belief and faith.

At this Easter season there are, in a sense, two resurrections we can celebrate. The first is Jesus’. At the centre of our faith is hope and that hope finds expression in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of our Lord. Hope that follows despair, life that springs from death are key themes in the gospel story upon which Christianity is based.

And the other resurrection? Well, isn’t it to be found in the lives of Jesus’ followers. Now, to be sure, it wasn’t instant. In fact, even in today’s reading, they are still meeting, or perhaps even cowering, behind closed doors. Yet moments like Thomas’ glorious affirmation to Jesus that you are *My Lord and My God* brings about another step towards their own resurrection. As these seven weeks until Pentecost progress they take more and more steps from hiding behind closed doors to becoming once again a living, vibrant body of people who are motivated by hope and energised by the Holy Spirit. For now, we encounter a crumpled, dejected group full of fear and confusion, yet the closer we get to the Ascension then on to Pentecost and beyond, we start to meet new life, fresh courage and inspiring hope. Disciples like Thomas change and become Easter Morning People, a Community of the Resurrection.

I think Thomas lived out the rest of his life this way. Tradition has it that he travelled to India in AD52 and spent two decades there living out the gospel. He’s greatly respected by the Indian Church even today. The legend goes he was killed by a spear in AD72 and is buried on a mound that now bears his name just outside of Madras.

To say Thomas is the man who missed Easter and to couple the word *Doubter* to his name isn’t the whole story. In fact, Thomas seems to be a wonderful example of a transformed disciple for whom the Resurrection meant everything – and whose life reflected the hope that is central to Easter – maybe even ending up hundreds of miles away from Jerusalem sharing faith upon another continent.

Well, I think Thomas is a welcome addition to the Easter story. And in closing I just want to say I think there is great wisdom in today’s narrative.

That’s because it’s hard for all of us to believe in Resurrection at times and I guess we have empathy with disciples who struggled to come to terms with it. A message of hope is certainly a crucial component of our theological toolbox. It helps us set to work on projects that might appear hopeless. It gives us a language to reach into the future with an optimism that wants to see things through. Resurrection hope is what we are about. But Thomas, in the story it seems to me, grasped that it’s not all we are about.

Thomas reminds us in today’s gospel that the Christian story is as much about Christ’s wounds as it is about Christ’s resurrection. For Thomas Easter day and Good Friday had to be blended together in the person of Jesus. And so, he is adamant. Unless I see the nail prints in his hands and the spear wound in his side I will not believe. For Thomas, I think, all this talk of resurrection was incomplete without the crucifixion, and that is fascinating.

This story, I believe, proclaims a down to earth faith. This is faith in the Jesus who suffers alongside us, who shares our pain and loss, yet who rises again on the third day. Life, our life and the life of Jesus, is always a blending of suffering and hope, Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

Thomas, I think knew this and so greets his resurrected master, who bears the wounds of suffering, with words that still thrill and inspire us today: *My Lord and My God.*

Thomas, the man who missed Easter yet the disciple who seems to have truly understood it.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

*Ian Green, Amersham, 25th April 2025*