

## **Sermon for 24<sup>th</sup> April 2022 – Year C – Easter 2**

**Preached at St Michael Smarden and All Saints Biddenden**

**Acts 5:27-32; John 20:19-end**

### **Sermon**

This story of so-called Doubting Thomas, in John's Gospel, has often been used in the Church to portray doubt or questioning as some kind of failing. Many times, people have come up to me as a priest and nervously expressed doubts about the Christian faith as if they imagine this is a terrible sin, and that everyone else in church on Sunday has never had a moment's doubt in their lives.

This reaction is not at all their fault – the Church has often pointed to Jesus' comment that "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" as a way of avoiding awkward debate. The implication is that if you doubt, or if you question, you don't really belong. Real Christians have an unquestioning, innocent faith that doesn't allow for the merest glimmer of doubt.

This is the message that has spread through the Church over the centuries, and it's still being implicitly taught today. It makes people in the Church scared to be authentic. How can you talk about your honest doubts if you're afraid you'll be rejected? So, people often don't like talking about God or Jesus or their faith or why they come to church on Sundays, because they don't want anyone to know that they have doubts.

The reality is that for most people, doubt is not only a perfectly normal part of faith, it's an essential part of faith. I'd even go so far as to say that faith is not fully mature until it is seasoned throughout with doubt, like yeast in dough, or like the mortar holding together a brick wall.

Did you know that when someone who feels called to be a priest goes to the selection conference where they are interviewed about their suitability for ordination, one of the main questions they are always asked is, “Tell me about a time when you have had doubts about your faith.”? The question is not “have you ever had doubts?” but rather, “tell me about the doubts you’ve had”, because it’s assumed you’ve had doubts. And it’s assumed you still have doubts.

Frankly, if you claim not to have doubts, the examiners won’t believe you. I actually said during my own interview in 2015 that since coming to faith for the second time in my mid-thirties, I hadn’t really had any doubts, and I assure you the interviewer’s eyebrows went straight up to the roof, and he immediately said to me, “so tell me how you explain all the violence, death and destruction in the world, and all the natural disasters? If God is good, and all powerful, why do these things occur?” I eventually had to admit that yes, it is always possible that my faith is mistaken, that I can never be absolutely sure that what I believe is correct and true, and yet something in me is so stirred up and emotionally moved by the possibility that it *might* be true, that I’ll risk making a fool of myself by trying to live as if it actually is true, even though I’ll never know for sure until I die.

I think this is the real reason Jesus says “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe”. Not because doubt is a great failing, but because people who trust in God’s love and message of forgiveness, inclusion, and compassion *despite* all their doubts, become immovable in their faith. Their faith has become a house built on rock, rather than sand, and how wonderfully ironic that that rock is made of doubt.

Honestly, the real problem with Thomas is not that he doubts that Jesus is alive, but that his envy at not being present when Jesus first appears to the disciples causes him to reject the friends with whom he has shared life for so long. Until now, what has characterised the community of Jesus most of all was mutual love

and trust. Thomas breaks that trust when he declares “Unless I see for myself, I will not believe”. He’s essentially telling all his friends that they are cruel liars, or deluded idiots, or both. Thomas’ fault is not his doubt, but that in his pride he damages the work that Christ had done among them, to build a community of love and trust.

This suspicion of our companions in faith sadly tears at the heart of many church communities even today. Many of us will know what it feels like to have our motivations distrusted, to have people assume the worst of us, rather than the best, when they hear about something we’ve said or done, or when we honestly disagree. So many people have left churches and ministry because of this – there is almost nothing worse in a community that attempts to teach compassion and forgiveness than to be unfairly mistrusted or to have our good intentions maligned.

Thomas of course, is prevented from causing too great a rift because Jesus himself appears to him a week later and provides the first-hand evidence that he craved. He immediately over-compensates and declares Jesus to be “my Lord and my God”, the most explicit declaration of Jesus’ divinity in the whole of the bible, but Jesus doesn’t let him get away with that. It’s not Jesus who needs to hear his fervent declaration of faith, or his apology, but his friends whose testimony he angrily denied.

A mature faith that grows strong in the rocks of doubt, is something that the writer of the Gospel of John desperately wants us to have. He explicitly states that the whole purpose of writing the gospel is so that we may come to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and that through believing we may have life in his name. But there is no one path to faith that he offers that works for everyone, no single argument that always convinces, and no experience that always transforms us. Some people believed in Jesus because they saw his miracles. Some believed in him because they were convinced by his teaching. Some needed

to see the empty tomb before they had any clue what he was about. But for some, even first-hand experiences of angelic appearances were not enough. For Mary Magdalene the key moment was hearing Jesus speak her name. For Thomas it was being invited to place his fingers in Jesus' wound.

For the rest of us, what we are given are these stories, and our own often silent experience of God in prayer, and the compassion, forgiveness, and grace we can offer to one another as we build our own community of love and trust. Rarely is anyone granted the perfect individual evidence that Thomas receives, but sometimes faith may emerge from the thin soil of a community that trusts one another enough to see the deep yearning for goodness and virtue within each other's hearts.

Sometimes it seems to me that the stronger our doubt, the stronger the faith that can take root in it. So don't be afraid of doubt. Don't hide it away in shame, imagining it to be a terrible fault you must bear alone. All the disciples doubted. If they hadn't, if the gospels were full of stories of perfect innocent faith from start to finish, how many of us could ever believe them?