

Introduction

Well it's been quite a week!

In the light of Theresa May's announcement of a snap general election I wonder how you felt.

I wonder if you are like Brenda from Bristol who made the news this week when a reporter interviewed her on the street

'You're joking. Not another one! Honestly I can't stand this. There's too much politics going on at the moment.'

Or perhaps you see it differently and you are pleased or maybe you don't know what to think. Council elections, general election, campaign for a second referendum. There's confusion.

The rest of the news is even more concerning. Another tragic attack on a policeman in France, more violence in Afghanistan, Threats of war from North Korea, continuing tragedy in Syria.

We're confused, disappointed, scared at times and sometimes we doubt. We lack peace, wondering if this is how things are supposed to be. Wonder if good can triumph over evil. What does Easter mean in our lives today.

That might be how you feel and I'm sure it's how the disciples were feeling after Jesus death.

Jesus appears to the Disciples

It is the evening of Easter Day, just a matter of hours after the discovery of the empty tomb.

Jesus had been betrayed, arrested, beaten, crucified, and buried in the tomb. Early in the morning, on the first day of the week Mary Magdelene went to the tomb and noticed the stone covering the entrance had been removed.

She brought Peter and John running to the scene where with shock they looked inside and saw the burial cloth in place. As if the body of Jesus had just vanished from inside it.

Imagine the confusion in their minds as they tried to figure out what could have just happened. All the different possibilities racing through their minds because although they had been some of Jesus closest followers they still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.

What they knew for certain was that Jesus had died and now his body was no longer here.

The disciples go home but Mary stayed by the tomb weeping. Weeping in the fear that the body had been stolen but then amazingly Jesus himself appears to her and greets her by name.

The joy of Easter morning as we celebrated together last week.

But now we come to the evening and although Mary had gone to the disciples saying 'I have seen the Lord!' they must still be in turmoil.

The disciples huddled together, the doors were locked for fear that they might be next.

The next one to be arrested and executed.

But still they were meeting together, perhaps in the same room as they had held the Last Supper, trying to make some sense out of all that had happened. Trying to figure out a way forward, trying to make head or tail of Mary's news.

Did they believe her at first?

And if they did what should they do next?

They were scared, alone, disappointed, doubting, in shock? They are a long way from Peter's confident preaching in our Acts reading

What changed?

Jesus came and stood among them.

The resurrected Jesus, a locked door no obstacle to his power. Jesus appears to them and brings them what they need most

Peace

'Peace by with you' he says – Shalom

He doesn't just mean relax, or I hope you don't have any stress but Shalom is a wholeness, a well being from head to toe.

Only the resurrected Jesus can bring this. Only Jesus that has died for our sins so that we might be forgiven can actually bring us that kind of peace. There is no genuine peace without the resurrection.

So many people in our world are looking for peace, looking for wholeness and on this evening of Easter day that is what Jesus brings to his disciples too.

He shows them his hand and his side.

I find this fascinating. There is something unexplainable almost mysterious about a resurrection Jesus.

He is the same but changed – Mary doesn't seem to recognise him at first and he has the ability to just appear in their midst. He is even more special, more powerful without the limitations of his human body and yet he still bears the scars of what he has suffered

The nail marks in his hands, the spear wound in his side. These wounds are not gone and we are reminded that in our suffering Jesus has gone before us. That is an encouragement for those who suffer.

The disciples now embrace the full joy of Easter they are overjoyed at seeing the Lord.

Again Jesus says Peace be with you and he breathes on them and gives the Holy Spirit. This is the first time the Spirit is received as Jesus had promised it would be.

Thomas

However one disciple is missing this incredible encounter.

Poor Thomas is not there. We don't know why but perhaps it's something about Thomas personality that means he wasn't there.

Now Thomas is an interesting character, we don't know lots of detail about him but he's spoken up a couple of times previously in John's gospel.

When Lazarus has died in John 11. Jesus plans to go back toward Jerusalem to Lazarus but his disciples warn ^{v8} "But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?"

However it is Thomas who says 'let us also go that we may die with him'

He's loyal, he's unafraid, He's willing to give his life even if he doesn't see the full picture. But perhaps he's also a touch pessimistic, never looking for the best outcome but resigned to his destiny.

However he also speaks up again in John 14

Jesus says to his disciples

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. ² In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. ⁴ You know the way to the place where I am going."

It's profound and as we look back with the benefit of hindsight we know what he is meaning and these verses give great comfort but for the disciples at this point it's a pretty confusing statement and it's Thomas that is the one to raise his hand and ask a question.

I'm not sure if you've ever been in that situation, perhaps a meeting or a conversation where you don't really understand what's going on but you sit and nod and smile.

I remember being in that situation in a couple of my lectures recently. The lecturer pauses, draws breath and says 'Is that all clear?' and I sit smiling and nod when I haven't a clue!

Well Thomas is the one brave soul who is bold enough to speak up.

Jesus says 'you know the way to the place where I am going'

And Thomas says We don't even know **where** you are going so how can we know the way!

And I bet all the other disciples were relieved. It's good to have that kind of person in the room, the kind of person who'll speak up and say I just don't get this.

And then because of Thomas' question Jesus says these amazing words

"I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me."

Thank Thomas for that bit of clarity.

So we build our picture of Thomas, he's loyal to the end but pessimistic maybe even a little stubborn. He's single minded and bold enough to speak up and say what everyone in the room is thinking.

And he's the one that was missing when Jesus first appeared. I feel sorry for Thomas.

Three years of following Jesus, thinking that he was going to be their King, that he was going to put right all that was wrong and then Jesus was killed.

It must have been totally gut wrenching for him. The confusion, disappointment, pain he must have been suffering makes me sad for him.

Then as he gets back to the group they clamour to tell him what has happened while he has been away. 'We have seen the Lord'

Thomas is unconvinced. Forever landing himself with the Doubting Thomas title of our all age sketch when he says

'Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it'

He's the kind of person who needs to see the evidence, who leans on the side of doubt, of pessimism. Who can't bring himself to believe in the resurrection unless he gets to physically touch Jesus.

He doubts.

Doubt

Let us think about Doubt for a few moments. There are many different kinds of doubt and not all are the same

For some people doubt is the result of their choices. A choice not to believe because otherwise they would need to follow.

Atheist Aldous Huxley “For myself, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation. The liberation we desired was simultaneously liberation from a certain political and economic system and liberation from a certain system of morality.

We objected to the morality because it interfered with our freedom. We would deny that the world had any meaning whatsoever.”

It’s stark but it’s honest.

If you’re going to believe in a risen Jesus then it’s going to change everything. You are no longer my own, there are things that God will ask of you and you’ll have to respond. So perhaps some hold to doubts as a way of avoiding the life God is calling them to.

But I don’t think the doubts of Thomas are of this kind, Thomas doubts because of the crushing blow of things not being as he expected.

There are a few things that make it harder for Thomas personalities and here I borrow from some of the writing of Bruce Milne

Firstly his **disposition**. If reviewing the earlier verses leads us to the right conclusion then maybe Thomas was a glass half empty kind of guy. Someone who felt that the good news of the gospel is ‘too good to be true’. Someone that doesn’t expect a happy ending or maybe even fears that they don’t deserve happiness.

Maybe you like Thomas think that good news is for other people

Secondly for Thomas an issue could be his **isolation**. Why wasn’t he there with everyone else? Had he cut himself off from the community. Trying to work through the problems on his own, struggling in isolation with his grief and his doubts. Perhaps even no longer feeling like he identified with the rest of the disciples. But through his isolation Thomas is forced to wait another tortuous 7 days before he sees Jesus for himself. It just makes it harder.

I think this is why Jesus has promised that he is there when two or three gather in his name, to encourage us to keep meeting together. Doubts and difficult times are best worked out within community.

I think we could all do better by daring to voice our doubts and to talk them through with each other. Be the Thomas that isn’t afraid to speak up and say ‘I need some help to understand this’

Thirdly for Thomas it was all too much of a **contradiction**. The horror and reality of Jesus death on the cross made everything else pale into insignificance.

The promises of scripture,
the words of Jesus himself,
the excited reports of the other disciples.

None of these were big enough to change Thomas mind. All that was on his mind was Jesus death and nothing, **nothing** could blot that out. For us too sometimes there has been a specific chain of events, a horrible set of circumstances that has broken in to our life and dominates our thinking over everything else. We lose sight of the promises of God because of the experience we've had.

Maybe you recognise yourself in some of Thomas traits.

The huge encouragement for us and for Thomas is that one week later Jesus returned to the same place,
at the same time,
through the same locked doors
and presented himself to Thomas.

Jesus doesn't dismiss Thomas, he doesn't cast him out. Instead he comes to him with the same greeting as before 'Peace be with you'.

Peace for your disappointment,
peace for your worries,
peace for your fears,
peace for your doubts.

Then he says to Thomas go on, 'put your finger here, see my hands, reach out your hand and put it into my side'

For Thomas the shock isn't just that the Risen Jesus stands before him but also that Jesus was aware of his conversation from the previous week. You know we never have conversations that are not in the presence of Jesus.

Jesus knows the depth of Thomas doubt, he knows the conditions Thomas wanted before he would believe and he comes to him.

Now we're not told whether Thomas actually takes up that offer and touches Jesus. I would imagine that now he didn't need to. He knows exactly what he sees and to stand before Jesus was enough.

Then what does Thomas reply, he doesn't say

"ah so you **are** alive"

Or he doesn't say "oops I'm sorry"

He utters the words **'My Lord and my God'** - Now he knows for certain, exactly who Jesus is.

Everything that has gone before,
his initial call to discipleship,
the teaching of Jesus,
the miracles and healings,
the crucifixion and the resurrection
all falls into place for Thomas and he **knows** Jesus is God.

And he's not just 'Lord and God' or 'Our Lord and our God' but Thomas call's him 'My Lord and my God' it's personal.

Do you call Jesus that? 'My Lord and my God'

Jesus says to Thomas

"Because you have seen me, you have believed; "

He knows that Thomas now believes in him, believes he has risen and believes that he is God. His doubt gives way to faith.

But Jesus also has a comment for you and I today

'blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed'

The writer to the Hebrews says

"Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." Hebrews 11:1

Jesus calls us to believe in him, even with all our doubts and confusion and says that through our faith we will be blessed.

Faith isn't a one size fits all kind of thing. We see that Jesus appears in one way to Mary, one way to the disciples and another way to Thomas. He meets each of us at our point of need and says 'Peace be with you'.

For those whose disposition says this is too good to be true – the risen Jesus comes and brings peace

For those who tend to isolation, to withdraw, detach themselves from community – the risen Jesus comes and brings peace

For those who cannot handle the contradiction of the pain they have experienced in this life – the risen Jesus comes and brings peace

Faith is a journey, we can see the disciples have travelled a long way from hiding in a locked room to the bold preaching in Acts.

This is their certainty in the resurrection of Jesus, what else could have changed them so much that they now speak publicly a message that will lead to persecution and death

Jesus has given them this power through the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

I love the closing verses of Chapter 20 – it's here that John lays out his mission statement, his purpose for taking the time to write this account

³⁰ Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Jesus did so much more than we have on record but why did John write these things down?

So that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that by believing you may have life in his name.

So because of Thomas, we can be reassured that even Jesus closest followers struggle with times of doubt but the words of John's gospel are written to help us

To help us believe that Jesus is the son of God and through him to find life in his name.

Amen