

Text: Psalm 118v14-24; John 20:19-31

Sunday 3rd April 2016

Juniper Green Parish Church

It's the evening of the very first Easter and all the disciples are full of joy with the news that Jesus is alive. All, that is, except Thomas. He missed out on Jesus' sudden appearance - probably he had taken himself away somewhere quiet to deal with the aftermath of Jesus' death. At some point the other disciples tell Thomas that Jesus has appeared to them. Thomas, the slightly gloomy, intensely practical, no-nonsense disciple has missed out - how disappointing, how infuriating. And so he makes it known, "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." Basically he's saying, "unless I get proof guys, there's no way I am getting caught up in your overzealous nonsense - it's just not practically possible, all you've seen is some figment of your imagination, something to help you come to terms with loosing Jesus. He's dead! So be quiet; stop banging on about it - you've got your beliefs, I've got my doubts, leave me alone, you can't convince me otherwise."

I have only two more Sunday's here at Juniper Green, but if I was here for longer, then one of the goals I would love to achieve would be to hear about everyone's journey of faith. I'd be curious to find out how it started. Were you like Greg, who came to church now and again, and came to faith in life? Were you like me, who grew up in the church but can tell you the exact moment I became a Christian? Maybe you didn't grow up in the church but someone invited you along one day and in time you came to believe and trust in Jesus. Of course, some of you may not have started the journey at all - sure, you've been to church, heard about Jesus, but there are just too many questions and niggles for you, and so your doubts are preventing you from taking that final step of putting your full trust in Jesus.

If I had time, I would also be really interested in finding out where you are at just now on your faith journey. Are you doing well? Does your faith excite you? Or have you had a rough patch but are now coming out the other side? Or are you in the middle of a hard place, and your faith is being undermined by some serious doubts? The journey of faith is never a straightforward path. There are times when it is a real uphill struggle against doubts and unbelief, and those times can be agonising and a real slog.

If you are someone with doubts, or if you know someone with doubts about Jesus, then the story of Thomas' journey of faith may prove helpful because I think his story shows us that Jesus wants to address our doubts so that we will put our faith in Him, or continue to put our faith in Him. Just as Jesus knew Thomas' doubts, He knows our doubts too - He is God in the flesh after all. And just as Jesus pursues Thomas, rather than

dismiss him, Jesus pursues us too, so that we may face our doubts and come through the other side. Not always with answers, I'm sure Thomas had a lot of questions still - but with enough to start us trusting, or keep on trusting, maybe with a renewed confidence. Either way, Jesus wants to address our doubts so that we come to that point, with Thomas, where we can say or keep on saying, "Jesus, you are my Lord and my God!"

Now, we may be thinking that it was easy for Thomas – after all, he saw Jesus physically. We have to remember however, that seeing Jesus physically is no guarantee of solving our doubts, because in Jesus' day some people chose to ignore what they heard and saw. Seeing does not necessarily lead to believing. Today's passage I think speaks into the dilemma of how we overcome our doubts, even if we can't see Jesus, because the same basis of Thomas' faith is available to us too.

The first basis of Thomas' faith would have been the previous three years he had spent with Jesus. He didn't suddenly just come to a decision to trust Jesus at Easter – it was built upon eye witness experience of all that was revealed about Jesus through His teaching, His miracles, and how He treated people. It built up to form a solid foundation on which Thomas could make that next step of trust.

That eye witness experience is available to us too – through the eye witness testimony we have in the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. As John said in v31, "these [things] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God." They are there to provide a record of the signs that Jesus is the Messiah, the supreme sign being His death and resurrection, so that we may come to faith in Him. We are able today, much more than previous generations, to confirm with conviction the fundamental reliability of the New Testament books as genuine eye-witness records. They are not myths or legends.

If you are struggling to believe the New Testament, if that is a doubt that is preventing you from taking that first step of trusting Jesus, then can I encourage you to consider reading something that may help? For example, "The Case for Christ" by Lee Strobel (either the full version or the youth version) were incredibly helpful for me in knowing why we can trust the New Testament record. If you'd like to have a look at them, just come and ask me after the service.

For those of us with doubts, but who are on that journey of faith, can I encourage you to come back to reading the Bible if you have given up? I'm not promising that it will fix things straight away, but reading the Bible, maybe especially the gospels, provides that foundation upon which Jesus can address our doubts. Nine years ago I was at Bible college, training to be a youth worker, and there was a period of time where a lot of things I believed about God were being questioned. It filled me with doubts and lots of uncertainty. I knew that the

New Testament record was accurate and reliable, and so because of that, the one truth I could be confident about, in the midst of all the doubts and questions, was that Jesus had died for me and was alive even now. I might not have answers to the rest of my questions, but to that truth I could cling and it saw me through. But I had to come back again and again to that truth, by reading the Bible. If you have doubts, you are undermining your chances of overcoming those doubts, if you are not reading the Bible. So I encourage you to do so; if you don't know how to start, then pick up some Bible reading notes from the church vestibule on your way out.

Now the eye witness testimony was a solid foundation for Thomas, but the second basis of Thomas' faith was his first-hand experience of the risen Jesus. Jesus had truly come back to life and He came and met with Thomas, saying, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." That first-hand experience was crucial for Thomas. Can we also experience Jesus?

I would argue that we can, not based on emotion, but on logic. If Jesus actually rose, then He is the conqueror of death and therefore alive continually; and if alive continually, then alive today as our contemporary. Of course, we don't experience Him the same as Thomas, but that doesn't mean we can't. In fact Jesus promised that we would be able to. Here are a few examples:

- Matthew 18:20 – "where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them."
- Matthew 28:20 – "surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."
- John 14:18 – "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you."

How will Jesus manage to do these things when He isn't physically present? He went on to teach in:

- John 14:26 – "the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."
- John 15:26 – "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me."

So the Father and Jesus would send the Holy Spirit so that we may continue to experience the ministry and presence of Jesus. Is this true? Is this reality? Can a reasoning human being believe this in the 21st century?

As you might expect, I would argue that we can – I have experienced it in my own life, of having that sense that God, that Jesus, was addressing me; principally through the Bible or through preaching, but in other ways too. That is also why it is so crucial to be reading the Bible and to be gathering with other Christians, for to neglect these things is to limit the opportunity to hear from Jesus.

The thrust of today's message is that Jesus wants to address our doubts so that we will put our faith in Him, or continue to put our faith in Him. Like with Thomas, that can come about through a mixture of eye witness testimony and first-hand experience; if we will give Jesus the opportunity. Notice that Thomas went back that following Sunday after Easter to gather with the rest of the disciples; he may not have realised it, but Thomas was making himself available, and Jesus honoured that by giving His direct attention to Thomas and helping him overcome his doubts.

Are we giving Jesus that same opportunity? Are we reading the Bible? Are we being honest with Him? It is His heart's desire for you to know life, and life in all its fullness. So if you have doubts, please go to Him, read His word, pray, meet with His people, listen to preaching, read up on the things that bother you – and given time, I believe He will help us overcome our doubts, for He wants what is good for us.

Before finishing, I want to speak to us as a community. We noted a few moments ago, that Thomas went back to join the disciples the following week. He must have continued to feel welcome, accepted, and loved, even with his doubts. That community of disciples was one in which doubts could be raised and faced together. Can the same be said for us?

Jesus says, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And then He breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." - "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." So much is contained in that phrase but surely at least it means that we are to be a community of grace and truth. Grace, so that anyone feels welcomed and accepted, able to be honest with their doubts, like Thomas. You may not know but church records suggest that Thomas eventually went on to take the Good News of Jesus to India, and to give his life there for Jesus. Imagine the loss it would have been to the sake of the gospel, if instead of grace, he had been met with rebuke, or a cold shoulder, or had been made to feel embarrassed and unable to express his doubts. Instead he was met with grace. Do we exhibit such grace?

The disciples were also a community of truth, a community bold enough to declare to people – "Yes, in Jesus your sins are forgiven; be reassured, you are reconciled to God!" And then at other times, to challenge people, in grace, with gentleness, saying to them – "Actually, all your good deeds, all your religious behaviour count for nothing; they will not overcome your sin, and so you are still in need for forgiveness and in danger of spending eternity without God." These messages are surely what Jesus means when we says, "If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." Are we that kind of community? Do we have that boldness? Yes, the second message can be hard to hear, "that you need forgiveness through Jesus", but without hearing that, people cannot then be told the first message, that they

are forgiven once they have put their faith in Jesus, and that they need have no doubt about it. Without holding to and sharing the truth of both messages, people can be left with terrible doubts and fears about the future.

So, wherever we are in our faith journey, let us take our doubts to Jesus and give Him the opportunity to help us overcome them. And in our faith journey as a community, let us be full of grace and truth, so that more and more people may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, the risen One, and that by believing they may have life in His name.