

Easter 2C
John 20:19-31
Inquiring Thomas.

Poor Thomas! The Scriptures identify him only as a disciple: Thomas, also known as Didymus, the twin. Whose twin, no-one knows for sure. But poor Thomas has been lumbered with a description that's hard to shake off: "Doubting Thomas". If you're named as a doubting Thomas, the words usually carry a slur, as if being a doubter is something unsavoury, a sin, something deserving of shame and scolding. Poor Thomas is never going to escape that reputation. Meanwhile, the other disciples get off scot-free, as if there wasn't a doubting bone in their bodies. While Thomas was off, somewhere, on that first night when Jesus rose from his tomb, these great men of strident faith were shaking behind locked doors.

So how about we put this episode under the light, and see what's really going on here. Perhaps even salvage Thomas' good name, and see him in a different light. Let's see what this might mean then for us and our faith, too.

What do the Scriptures tell us about Thomas? He's shown up as a bit of a realist amongst the motley gang of disciples. Not long before Jesus was executed, when his friend Lazarus died, Thomas was the one who was ready to accompany Jesus back into the hostile territory of Judea where Lazarus was buried. "If Jesus is going to risk his life going back there," he said to his fellow disciples "let's go too, so that we may die with him". Brave? Foolish? Trusting? Certainly loyal. The other disciples had already tried to dissuade Jesus from going back to Judea. He's also the one not afraid to ask questions and risk sounding silly –something we all could learn from. Then, on the night before he died, Jesus, talking about his death to come, said to his disciples "and you know the way to the place I am going". Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Thomas – up front, honest; no pretence; asking the hard questions.

When we find Thomas in our Scripture passage today, it's some time in the week after Jesus was resurrected. On the evening of that first day when his tomb was discovered empty, Jesus' disciples –minus Thomas - were gathered together behind locked doors, afraid. What had happened to Jesus might now happen to them. Hardly an advertisement of belief and courage. In fact, we read in Luke's gospel that when the women told the apostles the news that Christ had risen, "the apostles thought that what the women said was nonsense, and they did not believe them." Even if we stick just with John's account, the disciples who are huddled fearfully behind closed doors have already heard from Mary Magdalene that she has met the risen Christ in the garden, but they're still fearful, almost in hiding.

Up in this locked room, Jesus came to his disciples. Thomas wasn't there. But when he heard about Jesus' coming to them, he declared that he wasn't going to believe unless he saw the nails marks in Jesus flesh and put his finger in them. He's got to see for himself. He's not going to believe on the basis of

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what someone else says. Sounds reasonable to me! The others had seen Jesus – they didn't have to ask to see him!

So to single Thomas out as the doubting one looks to be seriously unfair. None of the other disciples had believed until they saw Jesus for themselves. If anything, he's been more up-front and honest about his thoughts.

And of course Jesus does come to Thomas– a week later – again through a shut door. He invites Thomas to reach out and touch his wounds. "do not doubt, but believe". Thomas sees, and believes, and responds "My Lord and my God!" Whether he actually ends up touching Jesus' wounds, we don't know.

How do you reckon Jesus said those words to Thomas: "do not doubt, but believe" – with a frown and hint of disapproval in his voice, like an order to someone needing to shape up? Or with soft love in his voice; like "it's OK, Thomas."? When I read the gospel this morning, I read it in this second way. It makes a big difference in how and what we understand Jesus is about. It can also be very telling about what we believe Jesus –or God – is like: stern and ready to find and pounce on our weaknesses and mistakes? Or simply knowing us as we are, ready to love and encourage us? The voices we use or hear when we read stories like this both shape the way we then relate to God, and it also reflects what others may have put on us about how to think about God. Time to think for ourselves, perhaps? Like Thomas, own and declare our needs for God, for Christ, to reveal himself to us.

Maybe Thomas should have been able to believe on the basis of what the others told him. Maybe the others should have been able to believe on the basis of what the women told them. They didn't, and Thomas didn't. But Jesus meets them where they are at, not where they perhaps should have been. This is not a story of judgment and reprimand, but of hope and promise. Doubt doesn't matter to Jesus – what he sees in Thomas is an openness to learning the truth and a genuine questioning. And so Jesus will respond to each of us who genuinely seek him; and so he will reveal himself to us in a way that meets our searching.

That's one of the things we can learn from the resurrection appearance stories, and indeed from the whole of Christ's life. he reveals himself to us in many ways – we may recognise him in others, we may sense him in his created world, we may be aware of his presence in Spirit. He is there in his word, the Scriptures. As we heard from this passage from John's Gospel: these words "are written so that you may come to believe Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name". And we encounter Christ in the Eucharist, as we take the bread and wine – his body and blood. If we're open – genuinely open, with honest, searching hearts, he will come to us; we will find him and know him. Christ will both reach out and respond to the genuine heart that truly seeks.

What can we take from this story of Thomas today? Of course there's the plain principle: it's OK to doubt, to genuinely ask God to reveal himself to you. But this is not just about ourselves. It's not just for a feel-good

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personalised faith; not just to experience a resurrection faith for ourselves. Although that's the starting point.

There's a more central question: Why? Why does he reach out? In the end, it's not just about ourselves. Jesus comes to us, comes looking for us, through our closed doors; quietening our fears, speaking peace, "Peace be with you". Why? So that we, too, in having life in Jesus' name, can reach out and touch others with his life and love and peace. Jesus breathes his Spirit on us, forgives, and sends us out into the world for us to put our hands on the marks of the world's suffering, to bring good news and hope to his creation.

Today God will breath his Spirit into bay Aidan in this sacrament of baptism. As he grows, like all of us, Aidan will need to decide for himself whether to believe in the resurrected Christ. Will he be encouraged in the gift of being a genuine searcher, open to seeing and hearing Christ and the things of God? Parents and godparents, you've made some serious promises to God today about guiding Aidan in the Christian faith. Your own openness to genuinely search out the truth of Christ will speak volumes to this child whom we've placed in God's hands today. As will the way you live and show the faith you have professed in Christ today.

And so for all of us.

To finish.....

The invitation from Thomas? Be open, be genuine in our seeking God, ask what we will.

The challenge? As Christ reveals himself to us, so we , too, are called to reveal him to others.

And the promise? As we heard Jesus say to Thomas: "Blessed are those who have not seen, yet have come to believe". Through beleiveing, we are given life in his name. Abundant life. more than enough to share to a wounded world.

Amen.