

**Second Sunday of Easter, 12<sup>th</sup> April 2015**  
**'Doubting Thomas'?** (John 20, 19-31)

*Doubting Thomas.* What a way to be remembered! As the one who doubted the resurrection, who didn't have faith, who couldn't simply believe. But is it such a bad thing to need to see for yourself, rather than accept the hearsay of others – especially for something so wildly unlikely? St Luke records how the women found the tomb empty, except for an angel with a message. But when they rushed back to tell the apostles, 'it seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them'. At least Peter got up and ran to the tomb: he needed to see for himself; and that was just an empty tomb, not the risen Christ, as they later wanted Thomas to believe. Yet no one speaks of the 'doubting apostles'.

The need to see for yourself is not wrong. Right back in the first chapter of John's gospel, on two occasions potential new disciples are invited to 'come and see' – to see Jesus, to spend time with him, to see if they might become followers. In fact the linked ideas of *seeing* and *light* form a major theme running right through this gospel. Seeing may be '*mere seeing*', just the outward appearance: many people wanted to see miracles, but the enthusiasm they created was superficial, and did not last. In contrast, seeing can also be something much deeper: a realization, '*seeing the light*', grasping the full reality of a spiritual truth. Jesus claims he is the light of the world; but it takes the eyes of faith and true understanding, to *see him* as the light of the world. When Philip tells Nathaniel he has found the one foretold by the prophets, Jesus of Nazareth, Nathaniel makes his notorious reply, 'can anything good come from Nazareth?' 'Come and see', says Philip, and in no time Nathaniel's become a devoted disciple.

Remember that marvelous account of a man born blind receiving his sight from Jesus – the whole Chapter 9 in John's gospel? The onlookers, and the man himself, were convinced that only the power of God could cure someone *born* blind. But all the Pharisees could see was Jesus as a sinner, breaking the law of the Sabbath. The poor chap was really got at – driven out – for defending Jesus. He says 'One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see'. And soon he comes to 'see' in both senses – Jesus catches up with him and asks 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' 'Who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.' Jesus: 'You have *seen him*; he is the one speaking with you.' And the man replies 'Lord, I believe.' One kind of seeing has led to the other.

As for Thomas, he wasn't there when Jesus appeared among the other ten in the locked room. We don't know why not. Perhaps he was disillusioned, given up hope, just too upset. He seems to have been an emotional person – earlier on, when Jesus told them that Lazarus had died, Thomas's reaction was 'Let us go, that we may also die with him.' A response full of empathy, but hardly helpful to anyone. Thomas clearly kept in touch with the others, and heard their incredible news. 'Unless I see the mark of the nails...' Can we really blame him? '... and put my hand in his side...' Well that is going a bit far: another emotional response. A week later they met again in the house, and Thomas was with them this time. Hoping to see, maybe? Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them, and said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see



my hands; reach out your hand and put it in my side...' Thomas answered, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe,' We are not told explicitly whether Thomas did touch as well as see, but the wording implies he did not. Jesus invited him to: Thomas's answer was his full-hearted confession of faith. And then, 'Have you believed because you have *seen me*?' No mention of touch. Seeing is believing: one kind of seeing has again led to the other. But for ourselves, we are blest if we can reach the deeper kind of seeing without the evidence of our eyes.

So: what do we believe? What, honestly, do we make of the Easter story? Looking at the gospels and the start of Acts, **on one hand** the narratives are at pains to emphasize the *reality* of the risen Jesus. He breathes on them, as a sign of imparting his spirit; Luke tells us he ate in their presence. Mark's own account is tantalizingly cut off where the women run away from the angel and the empty tomb, 'seized with terror'. Matthew goes so far as to say that tombs were opened and many saints were raised; that Jesus met them on a pre-arranged mountain in Galilee and (though some doubted) he gave them the Great Commission, to make disciples of all nations.

**On the other hand** we are also told that Jesus simply appears, though the doors are locked. Three times he is not at first recognized – by Mary at the tomb; by two disciples walking away to Emmaus, a seven-mile walk with this unknown stranger expounding the scriptures to them, on the subject of Messiah; and they only recognized him when they'd persuaded him to stay the night and he broke bread with them; and then – he '*had vanished* from their sight'. They rushed back to Jerusalem to tell the apostles they'd seen him, but by then the Lord had also appeared to Peter. While they were talking, Jesus himself stood among them. They were terrified and some thought it was a ghost. Finally, he was also not recognized when he appeared on the lake side, telling them where to cast their fishing net.

We speak rightly of the 'resurrection appearances'. He appears, and disappears. He is not seen in between. He is not seen at all by the general public, but only by disciples. Precisely by how many and on what occasions it is impossible to piece together. So we are left with an enigma, which the writers and compilers of the New Testament have not tried to disguise. They leave us with no hard and fast, definitive, facts beyond doubt. We cannot wrap up the divine nature in simplistic little certainties. What we can know for sure is that whatever it was that happened, it changed a confused, terrified bunch of disciple-failures into a group alive with spiritual power, knowing Christ himself was still with them, so that they had no fear of death or what the world could do to them. And with that God-given, magnetic charisma, they began to change the history of the world.

Let us thank God for the example of St Thomas: through wanting to see for himself, he found the presence of the risen Christ. May he encourage all of us in our searching for a true faith.

**Alleluia! Christ is risen! .....**

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