

Low Sunday: Faith and Doubt

Acts 2:14a, 22-32; John 20:19-31

In some parts of the Christian Church today is known as 'Low Sunday'. Maybe because it's after the high of Easter Day - remember the huge numbers we saw in the Church? Maybe it's because numbers attending church on this Sunday are considerably lower than last week. I learned that in the Roman Catholic tradition this Sunday is sometimes called Quasimodo Sunday, coming from the traditional Latin introit sung on this day based on the first letter of Peter, *Quasi modo géniti infántes, alleluia...* 'As new born babes, alleluia'. It is, incidentally, why the name Quasimodo was given to Victor Hugo's infamous bell-ringer in the *Hunchback of Notre Dame*. He was found on the doorsteps of the cathedral on the Sunday after Easter, Low Sunday.

It is also a day associated with one of the many challenging resurrection appearances of Jesus. On the evening of Easter Day, in the locked upper room, quite probably the same one where the Last Supper had been held, Jesus appeared to ten disciples. Judas had gone to his sad end, and Thomas was unaccountably somewhere else. Jesus prayed peace upon His followers, and gifted them the first intimation of God's Spirit Who would come later in force to give them the courage and the wisdom to go out into a frightening world, but with faith and with hope. Jesus then vanishes.

Thomas arrives and his fellow disciples tell him what had happened, and Who they had seen and what He had said. But Thomas could not believe. He is known as doubting Thomas, which I think is a little unfair since other gospels describe the other disciples in a similar way. "*And when they saw (Jesus) they worshipped Him; but some doubted*", says Matthew. Mark, in a postscript, says, "*(Jesus) upbraided them for their unbelieve and hardness of heart because they had not believed*

thinking the resurrection was an idle tale and did not believe the women who told them. Later on, *"...they still disbelieved for joy..."*ⁱⁱ Doubt was endemic then, and still is today.

Thomas refused to believe. He seems cut off from his friends, angry with them. Maybe he is jealous or hurt because they lived something special when he was absent. He tells them he will only believe when he can put his finger into the wounds of Jesus.

"The human mind searches for order: to make sense of things, to understand the world, to organize all the data that comes to our awareness. This is the impulse that pushes us toward scientific discovery. It is at the core of legal argumentation and forensic debate. It is the reason that we love mystery stories. We possess the keen desire to follow the evidence until a mystery is solved."ⁱⁱⁱ

To be here in Church the week after Easter can feel a bit like showing up at a party after most of the guests have left and those who remain report what a wonderful time you missed by coming too late. 'If only you had been here last week...hardly a seat to be had in the Church. The decorations were lovely...and hot cross buns and simnel cake at coffee afterwards...!'

The truth is that on this Sunday morning we missed Easter. Not by a week: by a mere two thousand years. None of us has ever lived at a time other than *after* Easter. For most of us every Sunday is more like the Sunday *after* Easter. We did not see, touch or experience Jesus for ourselves. And we have doubts and questions.

That may be the better way to think of Thomas. Not doubting, but questioning. The patron saint of the C21st. Thomas was not the only one to have questions when merely *hearing* about the resurrection appearances. Like the others in the resurrection stories, and everyone since, he wanted to see for himself. He wanted to reach out, he wanted to touch. When Thomas heard about the extraordinary events, he is unconvinced. In that, he is like people today. If something

sounds too good to be true it is almost certainly untrue. It's too hard to believe. We demand evidence. We have our questions. "The mind cannot make the leap of faith based merely on the testimony of friends...only one thing will prove the case: evidence."^{iv}

'Doubting' Thomas does not do him justice. I think of him as 'Questioning' Thomas. The consistent portrayal of Thomas in John's Gospel is of a solid realist, who was committed to the ministry of Jesus. Here we have him questioning. He wanted to be sure that whatever this vision of Jesus was, it was real.

It is interesting that for Thomas his questioning is based on the wounds of Jesus. Unless he sees the mark of the nails, unless he sees the spear-pierced side, he could not believe. When Jesus came again, this is what Jesus invited Thomas to do. To touch, to see, to believe. There's no mention of Thomas touching. But whatever he saw, it was enough. *"My Lord and my God!"* he says. To which Jesus responded, *"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."*

As then, so now. Jesus was, and is, in the business of meeting people where they are. Like a good doctor, he does not give the same prescription to everyone. Instead Jesus approaches His followers in different ways because our experiences and our approaches to life are different. He still, I believe, finds a way to bless us, as He blessed Questioning Thomas.

What are the questions you have for Jesus? What are the good things, and the difficult things, that you want to ask Him? What are the things that you find hard to understand, or believe? "But what about...? But surely...? If only...? It doesn't make sense...I can't believe unless... Unless, unless, unless." What will it take for you? I think of a man who once told me, "Just convince me. Explain to me right now what faith is about, and I'll believe you." I regret I had no smart or convincing answers to his questions. I wondered at the time, "Why test *me*? Do you really want to believe?" Of course the issue was it was not me he needed to believe in ultimately. It was Jesus.

And there are all those others, who lay down question after question after question, building up protection and barrier, and things to satisfy themselves when it comes to belief. But are they really wanting to believe, and commit, and surrender control, and follow? I don't judge. No, not me. I've been asking questions all my life and will continue to do so. As they say at the General Assembly every year, questions are always in order. But when the answer comes, when the marks of Jesus are made clear, will that be enough to address your doubt, and grow faith?

For Questioning Thomas the only test of the resurrection was the wounds - not the vision of wounds, but the real wounds. Is it still the case that people today are still waiting to see the marks? I believe it's not the marks in Jesus' hands and side anymore. I believe they are waiting to see the marks of Jesus on the Church, on us. The behaviour, the words, the actions, maybe even the wounds, on our hands and sides. The evidence that we are really connected to the Jesus Who was crucified and raised.^v For all that modern people are sophisticated, they are much more willing to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead, that His death and resurrection means something, when they see the evidence of it in the way we live our Christian lives. Not always perfect, but always striving. Not always glib-mouthed holy Joes, but sometimes struggling, sometimes faithful women and men getting on with their faith and their doubt, wrestling with the questions, and striving to be authentic to the kindness and the generosity and the forgiveness and the graciousness of Jesus Christ.

Do you want to see Easter faith, resurrection faith, Jesus faith? Look for it and find it in the different parts of His Church. Our task, as questioning followers of Jesus, with all our uncertainties and doubts is not merely to *tell* people about it, but to *show* people what it is and why it still makes a difference.

The story of Questioning Thomas is not finished with seeing and believing. It is continued with *being and doing*. In that we manifest Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, to our community and our world today.

It may be that we're not quite ready to shout from the rooftops, "*My Lord and my God!*" But maybe, just maybe, we can whisper it. And maybe, just maybe, we can show it in the kind of people we have become. Touched and blessed by Jesus.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ *Matthew 28:17*

ⁱⁱ *Luke 24:41*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Clayton J Schmit, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 2, p395*

^{iv} *Ibid, p395*

^v *E Elizabeth Johnson, Feasting on the Gospels, John, Vol 2, p328*