

## **Unless I see I will not believe (John 20:1-18) – Encounters with Jesus 7: Thomas**

*Many people find the idea of Jesus being resurrected from the dead completely unbelievable. It is just not possible for dead people to come alive again. Thomas one of Jesus's closest disciples was one of those people. He had been told by ten other disciples that Jesus had risen from the dead, but he refused to believe. Then the risen Jesus appeared to him...*

### **April Fools**

The Thursday before last was April Fools day and as you would expect there were some interesting news announcements:

- ITV announced they were making a new programme called, 'Dove Island', a programme to help birds find their special one.
- Wimbledon announced they were going to paint every blade of grass purple...
- Ant and Dec announced that they were going to rebrand as Dec and Ant...

April Fools jokes are stories that are often sort of possible, almost believable, but also faintly ridiculous. Are you someone who falls for them or are you less easily tricked?

April fools jokes are a bit of fun, but surely, the Easter story, that Jesus came back from the dead is beyond ridiculous, surely it is utterly impossible?

That is what Thomas thought....

### **Hopeless Thomas**

Like Mary Magdalene we do not know a lot about Thomas. He was called Didymus, which means twin, so he might have been a twin. More importantly he was one of the Twelve and that is all the other gospels tell us about him.

He appears a couple of times before the resurrection in John's gospel, where he comes across as rather hopeless. Not in the sense that he was useless, but that he was not very hopeful, he was unwilling to accept anything beyond death. His ultimate outlook was rather pessimistic.

In John 11, when Jesus decides to go to Bethany in Judea, where Lazarus has died, despite threats from the authorities in Judea to have him killed, Thomas quips,

"Let us also go, that we may die with him." (John 11:16).

Thomas seems quicker to believe in death than any hope of life!

Then in John 14, when Jesus is preparing his disciples for his death and promising that they know the way to a place in his Father's home, Thomas is quick to point out that they do not know:

"Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" (John 14:5)

Thomas does not easily accept the comforting hope that Jesus is offering them, he is quick to question it. Jesus's response in John 14 is to say:

"I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him." (John 14:6-7)

What does Jesus say Thomas's problem is. Is he too pessimistic about the hope of life beyond death? No, the real problem Jesus says is that he does not really know who Jesus is. But that is about to change. Thomas will know him.

### **Doubting Thomas**

What happens next is of course, that Jesus is arrested, put on trial, condemned, crucified dies and is buried. Thomas's pessimism and hopeless outlook seem confirmed. Following Jesus had all been for nothing.

But then on the Sunday after Jesus's death the rest of the disciples claimed to have met Jesus. They claimed he was alive and that he had spoken to them. For Thomas, slow to believe in any hope, this was ridiculous. He would be an utter fool to believe something so impossible. The dead stay dead, that is one of the saddest but most certain facts in life. Jesus had died and was buried that was that. Sad, but true. No way would Thomas believe the other disciples unless he saw and touched Jesus for himself.

And for some people, perhaps for you that is the end of the story. The resurrection is just unbelievable and nothing anyone says will ever convince you. You can relate perfectly well to Thomas's attitude. He was right not to believe all ten of the other disciples. Perhaps you think that anyone who believes the resurrection is a gullible fool.

Before we move on, it is important to accept that Thomas and such people have a point. The idea of someone coming bodily back to life after being dead and buried for over 36 hours is utterly ridiculous. Modern medicine would have trouble reviving someone who had gone through the horrific beatings and then torture of crucifixion even if they started treating him immediately after he died. Certainly not after he had died, been speared in the side and left for so long. Such a situation would be totally helpless. For someone to come alive from that is impossible.

Scientifically speaking the resurrection is impossible. To accept this is not to deny the resurrection happened, it is to show how amazing it actually was. The only way it could happen is if you had the power to change the laws of science. But no-one can do that except the one who made the laws in the first place: God.

### **Believing Thomas**

#### **Thomas meets Jesus**

For Thomas, however, his disbelief, his failure to accept the testimony of ten of his closest colleagues, because the idea was too fantastic was not the end of the story.

Why? Because he actually met Jesus.

A week later, the resurrected Jesus appeared to Thomas and showed himself to him. He even invited him to put his fingers where the nails were and his hand into the side where the spear had gone. Suddenly, Thomas is confronted with the truth of what scientifically speaking is impossible. He is confronted by a deeper truth. Now he is able to really know who Jesus is.

#### **Responses to the resurrected Jesus**

In John's gospel we are only told what Mary and Thomas say when they are confronted by the risen Jesus for the first time. Yes, we are told the other disciples were overjoyed, but we are not told what they say.

Mary who up to the moment of hearing Jesus say her name was overwhelmed by grief has no time to take in what has been said to her. She simply responds in the same way she has always addressed Jesus, "Rabboni!", which means teacher. A rather underwhelming response, but given the utter and immediate surprise, perhaps not surprising.

Thomas, however, although he did not believe the other disciples has had a week to contemplate what it might mean if the other disciples were right. If Jesus was able to break the power of death, then not only was there a real hope, but what he had said the night before he died must be true.

He had said,

"I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him." (John 14:6-7)

To know Jesus was to know the Father, to go the way of Jesus is to go the way of the Father, to listen to Jesus is to listen to God's truth, to follow Jesus is to receive life, the life that only God can give. Thomas may have begun to understand more fully the implications of what the resurrection of Jesus might mean, even if he was not willing to believe it.

Now, he has to believe it, because there in front of him in flesh and blood is Jesus himself. Now he does indeed, know, now he does truly understand who Jesus is, and so he cries out,

"My Lord and my God!"

This is the climax of the gospel, after all that John has shown us about Jesus, what he did and what he said, climaxing with the resurrection itself, then this is the only conclusion we can come to Jesus is God.

And if someone as slow to accept the unbelievable as Thomas became convinced, then surely we can be convinced too?

### **The Blessings of Belief**

And this belief matters. There are lots of strange things that people believe and don't believe. But some matter and some don't.

You might not believe that the moon landings actually happened. I think you are wrong about that, but not believing in the moon landings will not effect your life much at all.

More seriously you might not believe that covid-19 is any worse than flu. Such a belief will probably mean you are more likely to ignore government guidelines, refuse a vaccine and be more likely to be infected and possibly die of the illness and more likely to pass it on to others. It matters what you believe about covid-19.

What you believe about Jesus matters. Jesus says that to believe in Jesus, in his death and resurrection is to be blessed. It is to find true happiness and true life. After all if Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life, then it matters what you believe about him.

Jesus says, to Thomas that others will not have the possibility of seeing him in the same way as Thomas did. They will have to believe the message of the disciples who saw the resurrected Jesus,

disciples like John who wrote this gospel. To believe such a message is not a leap of faith, it is to accept the testimony of a number of credible witnesses.

But what blessings does such belief bring?

1. Well when Jesus first appears to the disciples he gives them authority to forgive sins or not. Forgiveness from God comes when we believe and accept the message of his witnesses that Jesus is the resurrected one, the one we can declare 'My Lord and my God!' That means that our past wrong doing, no matter what is not a barrier to receiving the blessings that come through faith in Jesus, although becoming part of Jesus's family also means we will want to stop sinning.
2. Secondly, Jesus gives the Holy Spirit to the disciples. This is also a gift to the whole church. The Holy Spirit equips and empowers us to live for God in a difficult world. We are not alone, God is there beside us through His Spirit in all the difficulties we face.
3. Thirdly, we have eternal life. This is the point John makes at the end. When we believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, we will have eternal life. Jesus did not just defeat death in his own life, he made it possible for us all to have eternal life.

John wrote his gospel to convince and persuade us that Jesus is worthy of our belief. Thomas, as reluctant as he was came to accept that Jesus was worthy of his belief.

Will you accept that Jesus is God's Son, God with us, the Way, the Truth and the Life? Will you accept the blessings that only Jesus can give you and become part of his family?