

Through Doubting to Knowing

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 27 April 2014, by David Gill. Readings for the second Sunday of Easter were 1 Peter 1:3-9, St John 20:19-31

Preachers receive a range of comments as people leave their churches on Sunday morning. Most are straightforward: "Good Morning!" Some are enthusiastic: "A great service!" Some equivocate: "That sermon was, er, interesting!" But every so often you hear a remark that really sets you thinking.

Like the morning some years ago when I'd preached at St James' Anglican Church, just along the road. As people filed out, a woman said to me: "Father," – it was St James', after all – "you preach like someone who is hanging on to the Christian faith by his fingernails".

Thinking about that, I had to admit she was right. Sometimes that is how I do preach. Because sometimes that's where I am. Hanging on by my fingernails. A posture in which, I suspect, I have many companions. Right??

Well, fellow fingernail-hangers, today is our day. This morning's gospel brings us Thomas, "Doubting Thomas" so called, the patron saint of people who refuse to believe just because others say they should, people who insist on *knowing* for themselves.

The "Doubting Thomas" label may be something of a misnomer. After all, this disciple was not alone in his incredulity. At the beginning, they all doubted. Indeed, the gospel writers go out of their way to portray the scepticism of those first believers. Remember their initial reactions.

At first, discovering that the body is missing, Jesus' friends assume it has been stolen. Then, encountering the risen Lord, they assume he's the gardener. Far from expecting Jesus to appear, or even hoping for it, their natural instinct is not just to doubt but to disbelieve entirely. Luke's gospel even has them thinking they are dealing with a ghost. They were, all of them, reticent believers, doubters who needed to be convinced.

Let's look at this morning's second reading more closely. It tells of two of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. The first involves all the disciples except Thomas. They are in a locked house. And they are scared. The risen Lord appears and stands among them.

"Peace," he says to them. Not once, twice. In that culture, "Peace" [= shalom, salaam] was a standard greeting. But here it seems to carry a special loading.

Jesus is not just saying hi to his friends. He is not simply wishing them peace. He is promising they will have it, as they face the dark days ahead and continue the work of the Father in his absence.

[Incidentally, that is the moment we are echoing when we exchange the greeting of peace in our worship. We're not just saying "Hello, welcome to St Stephen's". Or "Nice to see you again". It's almost a prayer. After hearing the declaration of forgiveness, or maybe as we're about to move into holy communion, we ask for one another the peace of the risen Lord. An important moment – an Easter moment – every Sunday morning.]

So, "Peace". Then follow some words about the sending of the disciples and the gift of the Spirit. The commissioning of the Church, and its empowerment for mission.

Enter the absentee, Thomas. The others are still bubbling with excitement: "We have seen the Lord!" But he's not buying it: "Unless I see and touch him, I will not believe". A week later the Lord appears again. Thomas does see and touch. And he believes: "My Lord and my God!"

Then the punch line, in a gospel that remember was written many years after all this happened, when those post-resurrection appearances had long since faded into history. Reflecting the experience of the early Church, anticipating the experience of generations to come, the gospel writer has Jesus saying: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe".

What are we to make of all this?

First, let us clear up this business of **doubt**. It's not something to be afraid of, or to feel guilty about. We all have times of doubt. Just as well too. Some versions of Christianity richly deserve to be doubted. And, more positively, doubt can often be a step towards a deeper appreciation of what matters, a clearer perception of what or who deserves our reliance. The times of hanging on by our fingernails may be, in fact, unrecognised times of blessing.

People sometimes think of doubt as the enemy of faith. Not true! Doubt is not the opposite of faith. Certainty is the opposite of faith. The line separating Christian faith from Christ-centred agnosticism is a very fine one. Perhaps that's why I often feel more comfortable with my thoughtful agnostic friends than with fellow Christians who appear to be wrestling with no questions at all, are interested in nobody else's views but their own and seem dead sure about everything.

Second, note what John's gospel means by **faith**. It's not referring to intellectual assent to some doctrinal proposition. Not *belief about* but *trust in*, reliance upon. In the fourth gospel, faith is a relationship word, a heart word more than a head word. So the Thomas vignette is about a loss, and a restoration, of confidence.

When Jesus died upon the cross, so too did his relationship with Thomas. Thomas had believed Jesus, given him his heart and his hope, followed him, staked his life on him. But that belief had crumbled, with the terrible events of Holy Week and Good Friday. Now they were saying he had risen, but Thomas had been burned once. He wanted proof before he handed over his heart to be burned again.

When Jesus says to Thomas "Do not doubt but believe," doubt may be the wrong word. A better translation might be "Stop distrusting me. Have confidence in me".

These two millennia later, the story invites us to that same confidence, to live an Easter life by entrusting our hearts and hopes to the risen Lord. Thomas needed to see it, touch it, experience it before he was willing to risk that relationship again. He wanted to *know*.

As, very often, we do too. But how? The post-resurrection appearances are long past. We can't travel back to them through the centuries. How are we to know Christ, today?

There are different paths to knowing. Because people are different. One person's way to encountering Christ is not the same as another's. Maybe you pick up a bible and are struck by this extraordinary man's life, by a particular incident or even by a single verse. Maybe you begin to see the Christian faith as a frame of meaning that enables you to make the most wonderful sense of your life, your world, your hopes and fears. Maybe you walk into a stunning choral evensong in a great cathedral, and the timeless beauty of good worship awakens your response to things eternal. Or it could be a personal crisis of some kind, the influence of a teacher, a conversation with a friend. It could be almost anything.

The way itself doesn't matter. But the encounter to which it leads surely does. Years ago I was seized by some words about this by Albert Schweitzer. In his book "The Quest of the Historical Jesus," Schweitzer wrote:

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same words: 'Follow me!' ... To those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship. And, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who He is.

“As an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who He is”. It is in encounter that we discover, in engagement that we learn, in relationship that we know. As a renowned Spanish matador, Domingo Ortega, once put it:

*Bullfight critics ranked in rows
Crowd the enormous Plaza full;
But only one is there who knows --
And he's the man who fights the bull.*

So hang in there, my friends. Be grateful for the fingernails, if they are what's holding you within the community of Christian faith. Keep on with your thinking. Press on with your exploring. Maintain your wondering. Persist in pondering life's baffling questions.

But don't get stuck on the questions. Move through them. Bring them with you, if you must. With and beyond all your questions, take the risk of trusting, relying, committing, loving.

Dare to believe. And -- with Thomas, with the communion of saints through twenty centuries – believing, you will know.

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