

John 20:19-31

¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

²¹ Again Jesus said, 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' ²² And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.

²³ If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.'

²⁴ Now Thomas (also known as Didymus^[a]), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord!'

But he said to them, 'Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.'

²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.'

²⁸ Thomas said to him, 'My Lord and my God!'

²⁹ Then Jesus told him, 'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'

³⁰ Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe^[b] that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

In the early 1950s an American psychologist began working with an idea which would become something that many of us are now aware of – at least to a rudimentary level. This idea is called “cognitive dissonance”. Now, I’m not a psychologist, but I’m going to try my best to sum up this idea quickly:

We each have deeply held beliefs. And whenever we encounter new information, we try to order that information so that it all fits with the beliefs that we currently hold. And *some* of the time we’re faced with new information that just doesn’t fit with our currently held beliefs. In this instance we’re faced with cognitive dissonance. What we **know** to be true is in conflict with the information directly in front of us. Something has to give.

We see a textbook example of this in our Gospel reading. The disciples were locked in the Upper Room. They feared for their lives. And then the Word of God appears. Christ comes and stands among them. He shows them His hands and His sides. They see His wounds. They receive His peace. And they are overjoyed. Where once there was fear of death, now there is joy in life.

Enter Thomas. Sometime after this joyous revelation, Thomas and the other disciples meet up. And they share a story with him. They were locked in an Upper Room. The only people that could get in would be the Jews – and that’s if they broke down the door so they could kill them. But something miraculous happened. Jesus Christ – yes, the same one they saw crucified such a short time ago – appeared in their midst. And what’s more, they **know** that this is the same Jesus. It’s not just that He could get through a locked door without even opening it. His body still bears the marks of crucifixion! There are marks on His hands. There’s the mark from the spear that pierced His side. There is no doubt! This was and is the same Jesus Christ...yet now he’s alive!

And then there’s this interesting moment of cognitive dissonance where Thomas is both entirely devoid of rational thought, and yet entirely focused on rational thought. Rationally, if he could take a step back, he would see the same things that we can easily see. Something has changed. The disciples *were* full of fear, now their joy overflows. These are people Thomas has known for some

time. They're not the sort to make up stories, or pull pranks – and certainly not about this sort of thing. And it's not just one person coming to him with a story, it's a whole group. Old Testament Law (which is also backed up in the New Testament writings) only requires two to three witnesses to an event in order to declare it valid. Thomas has no *rational* (or even legal) reason to doubt the words of his siblings in Christ. From this point of view he abandons rational thought.

And yet Thomas is intently focused on the rational. Thomas knew that Christ died. That event was seen by far more than this small group of disciples. A Roman historian called Tacitus recorded the crucifixion and death of Christ. Christ's death is a **fact**. It happened. And Thomas knows the Scriptures. He knows that Deuteronomy 21 declares that anyone who dies from hanging upon a tree is cursed by God. He knows that God turned His face away from Jesus as He died. Thomas is one hundred percent correct about these things.

And so, we can understand Thomas' plight. Yes, he believed Jesus to be the Messiah, the Christ. But Jesus died, being cursed by God (as He took on the sins of the world). And now the disciples want him to believe that God now blessed Christ? He gave him a new life? These facts don't seem to work together, so rationally there's a problem...a dissonance.

Thomas then gives this interesting reply: 'Unless I see the nail marks in His hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.' It seems that the catchphrase "seeing is believing" isn't good enough for Thomas. If anything, it's the opposite. This story is too much! His mind is in disarray. He can't believe. How could he believe? **How** could he believe? Well, if he saw, maybe then he could. He wants to believe. He so desperately wants the rationally impossible – Christ rising from the dead – to be true. He wants to see, that he might believe.

The great joy here is that Thomas' rational problem is solved, and not by discussion or thinking. It's solved in a very real and physical way. Christ, the Son of God, the Messiah – comes and stands among the disciples once more. Thomas hears those wonderful words: 'Peace be with you!' and his busy mind is settled. He finds that he no longer needs his proofs. In the presence of God

there is no rational or irrational. There is God! There is **Truth**. And Thomas confesses this Truth, just as Mary did last week: 'My Lord and my God.'

But why do we hear this story? Because...you and I are Christians. We believe in Christ and His resurrection from the dead with all our hearts and with all our souls and with all our minds. We are those who are truly blessed as we believe and have not yet seen as Thomas did. But! If even for a moment we might falter in our belief, if ever our rational brains might struggle and go 'wait...really? Is this what I truly believe?' If we ever find ourselves alongside the countless people outside the church that hear the story of Easter and find it a bit too much to handle... If that's you, or if you ever meet that person...I wanted to give you this glimpse of the joy that we can find in the doubting of Thomas.

Within Thomas' doubt is a desire for belief. It's not quite the same wording as that lovely cry we hear in Mark's Gospel of 'Lord I believe, help my unbelief!' ...but it's dang close. When you find yourself facing doubt – either in a person in front of you or in the mirror – that person you see wants to believe. Yes, even those people that have built castles of rational reasons why they don't like God or Christians or organised religion. Every single human being on this earth was knit together in their mother's womb. God did the knitting – the creation of new life. He does the sustaining of life now. And we want to get back to Him. We want to believe in Him. We want the eternal life that He offers...even if we don't know it consciously or rationally.

'But how can I help those who are doubting?' I hear you ask. 'I don't know enough. I'm not trained or not trained enough. I don't have the confidence or the resources to help. Heck, Thomas wasn't swayed by the disciples' words, what could I ever say to someone who doubts? That person out there...that person in here?'

Don't worry, I'm not about to start teaching a class on evangelism from the pulpit. Especially not if the doubting person you want to help is yourself. But I will tell you that you're better equipped than you might think. You're baptised! Christ dwells within you. And you've heard this text, where Christ stands before a doubter. And while I don't normally like to do this, I'd like to give you three

things from this text, three practical things that Christ shows us that you can do to dispel doubt in a person's mind.

The first is to be present. Christ was present with Thomas. You have Christ within you. Through you, Christ can be present with many doubters. And when you doubt...find another Christian! Make your way here. Receive Christ's presence.

The second is to declare God's peace. Both times Christ appeared He said: 'Peace be with you!' The authority that Christ spoke with calmed Thomas' mind. He received peace. You too can speak with the authority of the triune name that you were baptised into. You too can calm others, and when necessary be calmed yourself.

The third is to challenge doubt with Truth. Admittedly Christ had this a bit easier than we do, since He *is* the Truth. You may worry about not having enough Bible verses memorised, or that you don't know how to apply them properly. You might even be right about that. But that's okay. Just speak **your** Truth. Give your witness as to why you believe in Christ. Tell that doubter why you can declare the same words as Thomas, 'my Lord and my God!'

Today's text shows us the desire for faith hiding in doubt. And it tells us to be present with doubters, to declare the peace of God to them, and to challenge their doubt with the Truth. These first two are easy, the third is a bit tougher. If you think you might struggle with it, I'd like to leave you with the best words of Truth I've ever heard, that apply to everyone everywhere. They're the cornerstone of this Easter season.

Christ is risen!

Amen.