

Questions welcome

Readings: Acts 2:22-32, John 20:19 - 31

What the worst thing you can imagine happening? Maybe a natural disaster or losing someone you love? If that terrible thing happened, how would you feel?

The disciples might have been feeling some of those same things. They have lost their Lord and their friend, the one they had all their hopes pinned on.

Some stupid women claimed to see him. Really! They want to comfort from their mate John who saw the empty grave clothes. John believes that means Jesus is alive.¹ Surely that's too good to be true?

The followers are uncertain and anxious. They are hurt and grieving. Jesus was meant to turn the world upside down and now he is – well where is he?

And then Jesus shows up – to the ten who are meeting together anyway. Judas is gone. Thomas is not there either – perhaps he needed time by himself. Be careful not to read too much into his absence.

Jesus greets them with peace. Jesus doesn't give them a hard time for doubting his resurrection. He simply shows them what they need to see. And after providing the necessary proof, showing them his wounds, he blesses them with the same words of peace.

Now they know Jesus is who he says he is, the risen Christ, they are ready to receive their instructions and the power to carry those instructions out.²

But Thomas isn't there.

Thomas hasn't seen. So Thomas doesn't believe.

I get that. I am one of those infuriating wives who when my husband, says well just about anything.... my response will be to ask how he knows that. Where is it written? Who says so?

Back to the story: now a week later.³

Jesus rocks up to see his mates again.

Thomas is with them this time. He is still a Jesus follower. He hasn't left. He wasn't disobedient. He is with his friends. He just hasn't seen Jesus in his risen body.

Then the Lord Jesus shows up again. He greets them all and then immediately focuses on Thomas. This time Jesus is here mostly for Thomas.

¹ Somewhere along the line it seems as if Jesus had also shown himself to Simon Peter. See Luke 24:33

² Those instructions and that power from the Holy Spirit will be more fully realised at Pentecost.

³ 8 days is most likely counted in an inclusive way.

Jesus doesn't say "You idiot. How could you not believe what I told you? I told you I'd rise again. I told you more than once. How come you didn't believe me?"

No, Jesus is not mad with Thomas. He gets Thomas. He loves Thomas.

The last time in John's Gospel that Thomas was singled out is when he urged his mates to go with Jesus to see the very ill Lazarus. Thomas said "Come on mates. Let's go and die with Jesus." John 11:16

Jesus knows that Thomas's heart is good. He might not have believed Jesus was risen but he was still obedient.

Jesus very gently provides what Thomas needs; proof, proof that he, Jesus, is now the Risen Christ.

Thomas sees Jesus and can touch the mark of the nails and the wound of the spear.

Does he want to touch them? We don't know. Maybe seeing is enough.

We can't hear Jesus tone of voice when he tells Thomas not to be unbelieving but to be believing. It's hard to imagine anything but love.

Thomas's responds more strongly than the other disciples one short week ago. They were filled with joy but their words weren't important enough to be written down.

Thomas's blurts out "My Lord and my God." It's a faith response. He knows that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah, the One who will do all he said he would.

Jesus didn't punish Thomas for his doubts. The Lord knows our human condition. He knows the trouble we have with what we can't see or understand.

His words "Blessed are those who have believed without seeing" are not a judgement on Thomas or the others. They too believed because they saw. They just saw a week earlier than Thomas did.

What about us? We should ask question too. The Christian-faith is worth examining. We should ask questions of God, of ourselves, of our leaders, of God's Word.

The passage from Acts is part of a sermon designed to bring non-believers to faith in the living Christ. It happens after Jesus' followers have been filled with the Holy Spirit. It is an evangelistic sermon designed for those who don't know about Jesus.

But a confident, faith-filled sermon like this is not an argument for Christians to never have doubts or questions.

Doubting does not make us unbelievers. It makes us honest.

To be sure Jesus says those who have not seen and believe are blessed. The Risen Christ is the centre-point of our faith. The apostle Paul wrote that if Christ is not raised preaching and faith is in vain. 1 Cor 15:14-15

But neither Jesus nor Paul forbid us from asking questions. The Bible is the most honest book I know. There are plenty of places in the pages of God's Word that express doubt and ask questions of God.

In Judges 6:13-14 Gideon questioned God's goodness. But sir," Gideon replied, "if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our fathers told us about" God doesn't jump on him but gives him further responsibility.

Check the book written by Habakkuk the prophet. He wants to know how and when God plans to act. Habakkuk is patiently answered then writes a song of praise to the Lord.

In Revelation chapter 6, those who were killed for their faith ask, how long before God will judge and punish those who killed them. God responds with a call to patiently wait until the proper time.

What questions would you like to ask God?

What doubts do you have about God and the way God does things?

If you say 'None 'I want to challenge you. Why don't you have any questions? Curiosity is a God-given gift after all.

Some of us are very certain about everything. That makes it difficult for others to relate to us. It makes it difficult for honest dialogue. It makes it hard for not-yet believers to approach us when we are like that.

An understanding of the stages of faith can help us. James Fowler came up with six. In the interests of time I will use M Scott Peck's simplified version of four.⁴ These faith stages help us understand doubt in ourselves and others:

1. Chaotic-Antisocial

In this early stage, it's all about 'me'. Ideas about God are usually picked up from parents and/or society. All ideas are understood very literally. A few people remain in this stage through adulthood.

2. Formal-Institutional

People rely on an institution (such as a church) to give them stability. It's hard to see outside their box. They don't recognize that they are "inside" a belief system. Authority is placed in individuals or groups that represent one's beliefs. This is the stage in which many people remain.

3. Skeptic-Individual (Fowler calls it Individuative-Reflective)

⁴ <http://www.psychologycharts.com/james-fowler-stages-of-faith.html>

This is the tough stage, often begun in young adulthood, when people start seeing outside the box and realizing that there are other "boxes". They begin to critically examine their beliefs and can become disillusioned with their former faith. (People usually think these people have become "backsliders" when actually they usually move forward.

4. Mystical-Communal

People who reach this stage start to realize that there is truth to be found in the middle two stages and that life is paradoxical and full of mystery. Emphasis is placed more on community than on individual concerns.

That is a very simplified overview. If you'd like more info google it or ask me. I can get you copies.

Doubt is often a healthy thing. It can lead us to examine what we believe and why. Things we skim over superficially often do need to be examined more closely. In addition healthy doubt leads us to question error. Without some kind of doubt, we'd believe everything we are told and that is very dangerous.

I've used this quote before⁵ and it's well worth repeating:

Frederick Buechner says ..."if you don't have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or you are asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving!"

My point is that doubt plays a large part in our faith journey. It is not something to be afraid of.

Thomas was not convinced at first. He questioned what his mates said they saw. But when he was convinced his statement of faith is far stronger than what is recorded from the other disciples. "My Lord and my God!" reveals his total submission to the Lordship of the risen Christ!

Doubt and questions are a gift from God. Re-examining aspects of our faith and our walk with the Lord is healthy. It brings growth in our relationship with Jesus and with others if we allow it to do so.

The writer of a blog I read recently said this:

... certainty and doubt are not mutually exclusive. Faith, like love, is a decision, not a feeling. We choose to love and act in a loving manner even when we don't feel like it, and we choose to believe and act on that belief even when we don't feel like it or understand it. We are putting our faith in God's truth, not in our ability to believe. ⁶

The last sentence is key. Our faith is in God, not in us having enough faith. Our relationship is Christ-centred. It is not centred on how strong our faith is or isn't. The Lord will use our doubts and questions to draw us closer to him, just as he did for Thomas.

⁵ I gave a sermon entitled 'I doubt it' on 13th January 2013 and used the same quote.

⁶ www.redletterchristians.org/doubt-certainty-one/

Reflection questions

Jesus questioned everyone and everything. He asked questions that made everyone uncomfortable. What questions make you uncomfortable? How might that discomfort lead to a greater revelation of who God is?

On rehearsing the Resurrection story my grandson (aged 6) said "I believe in Jesus but angels; hmmm!" What aspects of the Resurrection story puzzle you?

John's Gospel was written "so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life by the power of his name." What concerns do you have about the quality of your life now? What concerns might you have about after death?