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Believing Thomas

A week ago Crucifixion-Friday and Resurrection-Sunday took our focus and we went through the pain of the crucifixion and the joy of meeting Christ resurrected. What does that do to us when we hear these passages every year? What does it do to us relive this incredible pain, and high joy? Does it change us? When my children were in primary school, friends who do not attend church and who do not recognise Christ asked if I could take their son to church on Easter Sunday. I love this young man since he was a child, a very deep thinker and brilliant scholar, now married and beginning with his own family. Aged 12 he took the service very serious and observed as much as he could. And I will never forget his question after the service: so how did that help? How did what help Tom, I asked? He explained his question: why are people saying that Jesus resurrection made all the difference if we can't see a difference in this world? This young Tom had already started growing his passion for justice in this world and he was looking for meaning and trying to understand what changes people. What change do you think the Easter story indicate for us, for Thomas? Have any of you had a sermon or two about how bad doubt is, with Thomas as the example of what not to do?

I had a coffee yesterday with a friend who describes herself as a non-believer. She asked what I will be preaching about and my answer was 'Thomas and Jesus'. Oh, she said, Thomas the doubter? No I said, Thomas the believer! Like me, like her, you may have also associated Thomas with a negative...Thomas who could not, or would not believe.... This friend, a very gifted Yoga teacher, showed me how Thomas in her Yoga book was described as the doubter. The author, an Indian yoga master, wanted to make a point about believing in the goodness of yoga and used Thomas' nickname for this purpose. A marked irony.....Thomas, who is now recognised as the patron saint of India, and in whose name the Saint Thomas cathedral is built in Chennai, India, is not celebrated for being the first disciple to travel far and wide outside the Roman Empire. Thomas is not celebrated in the West as a treasured missionary in India by many thousands of grateful Indian Christians, and how popular even the name Thoma in India is.....no, he is seemingly forever frozen in the image of doubter, nothing more. Why?

The way Bible-readers refer to the doubting Thomas is so ingrained now that it is strange not to find the heading of the passage to read: Thomas the doubter! In fact, I was again surprised when I realised this that I made sure to reread several different translations before I could accept that only some translations called Thomas the doubter. This description may have originated from the titles of artists like Rubens, Rembrandt and Caravaggio's paintings titled 'The incredulity of Thomas'. And yet, as early as 1818, a Protestant theologian [Anglican Thomas Hartwell Horne](#), in his book: *Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures* treated Thomas's incredulity, which he extended somewhat to the other apostles, approvingly, as evidence both of the veracity of the gospels, as a "forger" would be unlikely to have invented it, and of their proper suspicion of the seemingly impossible, demonstrating their reliability as witnesses.

So here we have the first gain of this seemingly negative image of a disciple – the way that Thomas wanted proof helps to strengthen the understanding that someone who appears to be sceptical, someone who is not easily gullible, wants more substance before believing.

So what do we do know about Thomas?

Thomas, being one of the twelve disciples, according to Matt 10:3, Mark 3:18, and Luke 6:15, is one who speaks up after the death of Lazarus: John 11: ¹⁶Then Thomas (also known as Didymus^[a]) said to the rest of the disciples, **“Let us also go, that we may die with him.”** It is remarkable to hear this brave statement as some of the disciples tried to remind Jesus that he had almost being stoned to death. This statement alerts the reader to the dangers of Jesus travelling closer to Jerusalem. It is only after Lazarus is woken up from the dead that we hear, in John 11:45, about the heightened plot to kill Jesus. What did Thomas know or feel? And why was he so brave?

Again in John 14:5 we hear of Thomas: Thomas said to him, **“Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”**

Don’t you love it when someone asks a question you would love to ask, yet do not seem to know how to ask, or do not have the confidence?

In this rich chapter, we have Thomas, Phillip and Judas ask questions from Jesus, wonderful clarifying questions, and Jesus responds. Thomas question stands as a good instance of a person taking seriously the matter in discussion, and he engages his, and our mind. And this question gives Jesus a way to explain a very intricate truth...clearer than any of us can articulate this?

In John 20 Jesus meets up with the disciples: Jesus came and stood among them and said, **“Peace be with you!”** ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. **The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.** Let us note, it is only after the disciples witness the marks of death on the living Jesus that they become sure and begin to feel joyful. It is action of Jesus, the protagonist, which brings about the change, not the strength of faith already in the disciples.

And now we hear of the absence of Thomas....he was not with the other disciples... Why? Is that another subtle negative? Some commentaries note that this is to create a dramatic moment....The absence of Thomas now marks the absence of belief, his willingness to want to understand what is going on, his commitment to truth. Another subtle and beautiful noticing – his friends to not cast him out for not being able to believe what they believe....that is love!

Maybe we should stop for a moment to consider the post-traumatic stress within the disciples, especially Thomas who had not seen the resurrected Jesus. How open are we when we are in a state of shock, numb from pain and grief...sorrow is something which makes us naturally inward-looking. How strong is your faith in these moments? How sure your dedication when your world is filled with pain? Here is Thomas, stating that it is hard

to believe. Thomas was not expecting to believe that Jesus could move through closed doors.... the attention is now fully on Thomas....and his reaction to Jesus appearing through closed doors, Jesus saying “**peace be with you**” like he did so many times before. But here we need to choose our Bible translation:

The Jubilee Bible translates: ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, Reach here thy finger and behold my hands and reach here thy hand and thrust it into my side and be not unbelieving, but faithful.

The English Standard version: Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.” ²⁸**The Message:** **27** Then he focused his attention on Thomas. “Take your finger and examine my hands. Take your hand and stick it in my side. Don’t be unbelieving. Believe.” **But The NIV and NRIV states** 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.”

So depending on your theology, which translation do you favour? Do you believe that Jesus is condemning Thomas doubting or does this text speak more to you about how do we come to belief, each of us in unique ways – some at 4 and some at 94? Do you find the words of Jesus harsh and condemning or gracious and full of persistent acceptance? Maybe in the light of the young Tom who attended the Easter service with me: what change did Jesus bring about in Thomas, the disciple?

We are so acutely aware of the cost of the Cross, the fragmentation of Jesus followers and in the bewilderment of the disciples who all deserted Jesus we try to find out who are the winners and where are we in relation to the winners and losers of Easter. As humans our sense of identity is so closely connected with who are winning and who is not, and we desperately try to avoid pain by being part of the winning group. As people who call ourselves Christians, or people who are Christ-like, we hope to align ourselves closer with God with this identity. That makes us feel better, or good, or even better than others?

Maybe it is our yearning to feel comfortable when we can divide ourselves from others, based on our sense of purity, and then we judge, often so negatively. And so we prefer to call Thomas a doubter, rather than celebrate him as the first person able to confess: My Lord and My God!? The change which came within Thomas is so profound, and so life-changing, yet our minds first cling to the negative? And this in the light of all the love, all the grace, all the change which Christ’s life and death had brought about?

Over coffee my yoga friend and I wondered why we as people are so quick to group, to distance ourselves on the basis of race, creed and culture, politics, denominations or faith.....And she told me an incredible true story.

She heard about a priest who had been called to the deep south of the US – to ku klux klan country. She told about how this priest was bitterly criticised by his congregation for taking time to have conversations with members from the ku klux klan. He persisted and kept on loving and listening. And years later, when he was interviewed about this and asked why he mixed with them, while serving his parish, he brought out several ku klux klan outfits, given to him by members who had slowly over time decided that they did not want to wear those clothes anymore, in their own time, in their own readiness. An amazing story.....yet what intrigued me more was my friend who became so animated when sharing how this story touched her....I wonder who was the minister? And I wonder who is changed when we stand before the breath-taking work of Christ?

The story of Thomas is not about the misdeeds of Thomas. It is about Jesus, and the grace given by him to Thomas, to us, to change the world.

Jesus did not shame Thomas, no, he rather focussed to give Thomas what Thomas needed to believe, just as he done with the other disciples, just as he does for you and me. Jesus did not judge – he just stood, he just waited, just like he did with Mary, just like he did with the other disciples. Is Christ is doing that for my friend..... Thomas responded: My Lord and My God.

Jesus went deeper with Thomas... he assured Thomas, and the other disciples, and us, that we do not have to meet him in the historical sense to believe, but that our experience of his pain and his love will be as real as the first disciples. Jesus promises that the revelation of God is grounded in history, but that it transcends history into a living and palpable experience of being changed forever.

The story of Thomas the believer is not about the reaction we have to Jesus, it is far bigger than that: it is about the reaction Jesus has to us. It is about the work Jesus has prayed about in John 17, my favourite Bible passage, where Jesus prays for all believers and then for those who will believe. Because Jesus believes in us!

So the cross and the resurrection had brought about remarkable changes, available to all of us....Thomas is one remarkable witness of that change with his words: My Lord and My God. I am changed. Tom is changed. And my coffee friend is changed. What about you? Amen.