

Reflection for 2020-04-19

John 20:19-29

Peace be with you all.

Thomas has had a lot of criticism over the years because of this story, and I think that's pretty unfair. We call him 'Doubting Thomas' and hold him up as an example of someone with weak faith who really shouldn't be respected, and all because he was faced with a frankly incredible claim and didn't just jump on board blindly.

This all happens just a couple of days after the disciples saw their teacher and leader arrested, rushed through a mockery of a trial, be condemned to death, be crucified, die and be buried in a stone tomb. They'd gone from the top of the heap to the bottom in just one day, and must have felt in grave danger of being killed themselves if they made any trouble at all.

And then, Thomas's friends find him and say, "Hey, we just saw Jesus and talked to him. He appeared to us in a locked room." And he's just supposed to go, "Yeah, sounds fair enough"?

Jesus hadn't prepared his disciples for this. He hadn't said, "Don't worry when I'm killed – it won't last and I'll be back before you know it." He had made veiled allusions but it was only when they looked back years later that the disciples saw these as predictions, and there were only one or two even of those.

The disciples had been so unsure of what was happening that they'd tried to stop Jesus even going to Jerusalem. They'd variously abandoned Him and denied even knowing Him.

And they knew, as we know, that dead people are dead. They'd seen Jesus raise Lazarus but even that kind of proves the point: it had needed Jesus *alive* to do that. And now Jesus was dead.

So, when the other disciples come to Thomas and say, "Jesus is alive," I don't think it's unreasonable to respond as Thomas did and say, "I'll believe that when I see it." Especially given that Jesus clearly respects that response. But I'm getting ahead of myself!

What's more interesting to me is that Thomas wasn't there with the other disciples that first day. He wasn't in the room when Jesus appeared – that's why he didn't experience it with the others.

We don't know why he wasn't there but it's not hard to imagine. The disciples were the foremost members of a movement whose leader had just been arrested and executed for treason. They were scared enough to be meeting indoors behind locks and bars. Maybe Thomas was too scared to be with them.

Or maybe the lines of communication were broken. The disciples had scattered after Jesus's arrest, with no plan and no idea what to do next. After Jesus died, late on Friday, there'd been no time to do anything before the Sabbath started, which filled up Saturday.

Saturday night, then, or Sunday morning, they could have started to talk, but how would they find each other? How would they get the word around the group (and don't forget, they knew they could easily be arrested themselves, so they'd need to keep it secret)?

In the other resurrection accounts, we only hear the names of a few disciples – Mary, John, Peter. Perhaps that's because they were scattered in small groups.

The thing is, then, we don't know why Thomas wasn't there. But we know that the other disciples found him and told him what they'd seen. And, sure, Thomas wasn't convinced. But he *was* there with them the following week. He didn't think the group was completely delusional. He was still committed to the work, to pursuing God's Kingdom in Jesus's Way. And he was at least open to the possibility.

And so, when Jesus turns up again, Thomas is there. He sees the risen Christ, hears the words of peace, sees the wounds still on Jesus's body.

And Jesus comes and talks directly to Thomas. None of the other disciples get the personal treatment here, not even Peter, but Thomas does. Jesus comes and addresses the specific questions Thomas has, the particular things that he'd said, "Here's what I need to see".

He invites Thomas to touch his wounded hands and side, to see and feel that this is real. That this is indeed the person he'd followed around the

country for 3 years. Whose vision of God's Kingdom he'd been captured by.

And Thomas responds immediately, affirmatively and honestly. "My Lord and my God," he says. He'd wanted evidence, and when he gets it he jumps right on board.

And this is, we should note, the first time that *anyone* calls Jesus "God." Thomas isn't holding anything back here.

Indeed, Thomas is, according to legend, totally committed to spreading Jesus's message for the rest of his life. He travels on great missionary journeys as far as China, and is credited to this day with founding seven Christian churches in India, and was martyred there at the age of about 70.

But there's a third thing I want to point out in this story that's perhaps especially relevant to us right now.

The disciples meet together as soon as they can, as often as they can. They reach out to all their scattered members and bring them in, include them in the conversation. It's important to them that they continue the relationships that they've built up over the years. And it's important to them that they continue the mission that Jesus had started.

Despite the huge barriers that were being put up to prevent their being a community, they found ways around them.

And, in response, Jesus met them. Despite the secret meetings, the locks on the doors, even death itself, Jesus comes and meets them.

Whenever two or three are gathered together in Jesus's name, He is there with them, we're told. And this story shows us the start of this truth. No door or lock can keep Jesus out. No barrier, no isolation, no video technology is enough to stop Him being present with His followers.

Meeting in community is a crucial way in which we meet Jesus. There's something special in making this space, in being together, in worshiping as a community.

So, as we continue to meet together in this difficult time: Jesus is here.

As we re-work our social bonds through phones and computers: Jesus is here.

As we worship through the mediation of video: Jesus is here.

He's here just as much as He is when we meet in the church building – where we use microphones and speakers to be able to hear the minister anyway!

Whatever the situation: Jesus is here.

He's with us as we worship now. He's with us as we sit in our homes.

He's with us as we wait in silence, or try to teach our children or to continue our work or to support our neighbours.

The message of Easter, and of Thomas's meeting with the Risen Christ, is this: there is nothing that can now separate us from the presence of Jesus Christ our Saviour.

He is risen indeed. Alleluia!