

Christchurch Marlborough
Sunday 11th April
Second Sunday of Easter

Welcome to this week's worship, whether you are using this worship sheet or joining in the service at Christchurch. On this second Sunday of Easter, we turn our attention to the disciple Thomas and consider whether he has been treated fairly over the years and what we may learn ourselves from his life.

We use this service, knowing that we are coming into the presence of God with the Church family. Let us spend a few moments in quiet, as we prepare ourselves for worship. Maybe light a candle, or gaze in wonder at a flower or at what you can see out the window, knowing that God sees you preparing for worship and focusing on him.

A Candle is lit

We listen to 'Great is the Lord, and most worthy of praise' played on the piano

Call to worship

We come from a world confused about truth.
We come with our own uncertainties.
Let us bring the darkness of human understanding
into the presence of God, who is light.
Let us bring the story of our search for truth
and share in fellowship
the things we have heard and seen and touched.

Hymn: Sing/ Read /pray /proclaim the words
StF 306 Now the green blade rises from the buried grain
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g-5Bi2jM40E>

Prayers of Thanksgiving and Confession:

Compassionate, risen Lord, present among us, we praise you for placing the mission of your Church into our hands, though we are hesitant - though we feel inadequate, though we make mistakes.

When we are cautious - make us confident. When we fall down - pick us up.

And when are tempted to opt out - draw us back into your love, that we may share, celebrate and model your peace and your patience. **Amen.**

We confess that we are so often judgemental of others.
In particular, we berate those who do not share our beliefs.
What need have they of proof? Why can't they just believe?
Yet we live in a world where little is taken at face value.
Fake news surrounds us, and the camera definitely does lie.
Therefore, Lord, forgive us when we look down upon the unbelievers, the doubters, the ones who demand proof; for this is the world in which we live, and the world to which we must proclaim your truth.
There is no proof we can offer in these times,
except to show our belief in the ways in which we reach out,
by accepting and loving unconditionally,
by showing patience and forbearance to those who differ from us – or is it we who differ from them?
Therefore, forgive us when we fail to reflect your truths in our daily lives, and let us become testaments to your risen power.
May Christ be evident in us and in all that we do. **Amen.**

Lord's Prayer

**Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name,
Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial, but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are Yours, now and for ever. Amen**

Reading: 1 John 1: 1 – 2:2 (The Message)

Introduction to the reading from John's Gospel.

Disciple 1: I saw the empty tomb.

Disciple 2: Mary told me she had seen it.

Disciple 3: I had heard a rumour, but I'm not so sure it can be true.

Disciple 1: He did say he would come back.

Disciple 2: Of course, we all hoped he might do something amazing.

Disciple 3: It's just wishful thinking though, isn't it?

Disciple 1: But the miracles we saw, the things he said
– don't you think he was 'The One'?

Disciple 2: He did seem like he may be the Messiah
– but we have said that before!

Disciple 3: Coming back from the dead, though
– it doesn't seem possible, does it?

Disciple 1: Can you imagine it – what would he say to us?

Disciple 2: What would he look like?

Disciple 3: Would he still be cut and bruised?

Disciple 1: What about his wounds?

We'd know it was him if we saw the wounds.

Disciple 2: But we'd hardly be asking to see them, would we?

Disciple 3: We'd just be so bowled over to see him alive!

Reading; John 20: 19-31

Reflection: The trials of Thomas

If I was to say to you the word 'Thomas' and ask you to tell me the first word that comes into your head then some who have a relative or friend called Thomas might come up with something associated with that person. My father in law was potty about trains so he may well have said 'tank engine'. But a significant number I think will associate the name Thomas with 'doubt' or 'doubting'. It's not just a Biblical thing. Anyone who appears to be in the least bit sceptical about anything is in danger of being referred to as a 'doubting Thomas'. In the next few minutes I want to suggest to you why I think that landing the disciple Thomas with that particular epithet is unfair, is inaccurate but more than that it obscures the truth of what took place in that locked room 2,000 years ago.

First a note of caution. As a student of history I know very well how truth can very quickly be obscured and even manipulated. Two very different examples. The episode that we know as the blitz (the systematic bombing of cities and towns – principally London – during the second world war) began on 7 September 1940. So far so good, the date is not in dispute. However, much of what has been written and reported about the blitz is a matter of interpretation, opinion and propaganda. The object of the blitz from Germany's perspective was to cause as much terror and breakdown of morale within the population as was possible. If the will of the people could be broken then the likelihood of the government being forced to sue for peace was increased. So there developed what became known as the 'blitz spirit'. The stiff upper lip, fortitude, 'keep calm and carry on'. That was the notion that was spread in the newspapers and on the radio during the war and it kind of stuck.

Then the other night on the television Lucy Worsley presented a programme which used contemporary diary records of people who lived through the blitz which painted a very different story. Of people who were frightened, of people who were angry at decisions made by government of people who had had enough. The so called 'Blitz Spirit' conjures up feelings of resilience, pride and even comfort. But whether it is historically accurate is open to serious question.

Secondly, some of you will know that I was born, schooled and, until my mid 30's, lived in or around Bristol. The name of Edward Colston was, and still is, synonymous with Bristol. It cannot be denied that he gave a great deal of money to the city. He had no wife or family or dependants so he gave money away. You could walk down Colston Street. The city's main music venue was the Colston Hall. You could be educated at Colston's School. In fact if you go to All Saints Church in Bristol you will find a monument to him which includes a very helpful list of all the recipients of his generosity. Until last summer if you went to Colston Avenue you would find a statue of the great man with a plaque which read "As a memorial of one of the most virtuous and wise sons of their city".

The shame of Bristol is not that Edward Colston was reputedly involved with the slave trade and that the money he had gifted to the city had been made from that trade. There is not a great deal that can be done about that. The shame is that the truth about Colston has been known for many years but it was convenient to kind of airbrush that out and continue to remember him purely for the benefactor that he undeniably was. However, there is now another suggestion that Colston actually made his money not directly from the slave trade but from moneylending, acting as a financier. That said, he undoubtedly benefitted from the slave trade, albeit indirectly, and in giving so much of his wealth away he drew attention to himself which is why he in particular has been singled out for so much vilification.

History can be very misleading. The truth is quite often obscured and difficult to see. The lesson is not always to believe what you first read and I haven't even started on Churchill!

Back to Thomas who, as I suggested earlier, I believe has been unfairly tarnished with the name 'Doubting Thomas'. What do we know about Thomas? If I were to say 'very little' I would be exaggerating. The notes in my Bible give his occupation as 'Disciple of Jesus' which is less than helpful. Like being asked to describe an elephant and saying that it looks like an elephant! Matthew, Mark and Luke all list Thomas as one of the twelve but that is the only mention he gets from them. Pretty much all that we know about Thomas is what is recorded by John in his gospel writing.

The first occasion on which we encounter Thomas is when Jesus and the twelve had been driven out of Jerusalem after being threatened with stoning because Jesus had claimed to be God's Son. The religious leaders accused him of blasphemy and Jesus was forced to retreat across the Jordan well away from Jerusalem. In spite of that we are told that many came to believe. Word then comes from Martha and Mary that Lazarus, a friend of Jesus, is sick. Lazarus lived in Bethany, a village very close to Jerusalem and when Jesus announces his intention to go to his friend the other disciples are horrified. It is Thomas that John records as speaking out and encouraging the others to go with Jesus – "Let us also go, that we may die with him" he says. Some might think that a bit gung ho. Others will see it as loyalty to Jesus. Either way it is clear that Thomas is not someone who is swayed by the crowd. He is willing to speak his mind even if that runs the risk of being unpopular.

The next time in John that Thomas is mentioned is in the upper room where the last supper is eaten. In Matthew, Mark and Luke the time in the upper room is dealt with in less than one chapter. John, however, devotes five whole chapters to it. He begins with the washing of the disciples feet and Peter resisting Jesus's desire to wash his feet. The narrative moves on to the last supper itself, Judas being revealed as the betrayer and Jesus revealing that Peter will deny him. And then in John's account Jesus delivers what have come to be known as the final discourses. Whether the discourses were actually delivered by Jesus at this point of time is up for debate but doesn't really matter given that John was not seeking to write a biographical or historical account. There are similar pieces of teaching in the other gospel accounts but at different times. John presents them as Jesus's final piece of teaching to the disciples before he is arrested and tried. Remember that the atmosphere while Jesus is speaking will be emotionally charged. Judas is the betrayer, Peter is the denier. They have eaten bread and drunk wine that Jesus has told them are his body and his blood. They know something is going to happen but they don't know what.

Jesus begins by explaining to the disciples and to all his followers to come the importance of trusting in God and in Him. He uses the familiar imagery of a house with many rooms. He promises the disciples that he will return to take them with him to where he is. He promises them that they will know the way, at which point Thomas asks the question which may well have been the question that they were all desperate to ask. Not a terribly deep question, given the momentousness of what Jesus was saying, but a very practical question – "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Kate will tell you that if I am going anywhere I need to have a map. Without a map to tell me where to go I feel totally unprepared. One of the surprises I have had in packing our belongings ready to move is just how many maps we own. Believe me it's a lot! In response to Thomas's question though Jesus doesn't produce a map. He uses one of the "I am" sayings that are peppered throughout the fourth Gospel. "I am the way, the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on you do know him and have seen him". So Thomas again is portrayed as a disciple who is not prepared to be part of the crowd. He is not prepared to accept Jesus at face value but is concerned with practicalities in the same way that many of us may also be.

The third and final time that John records an interaction between Thomas and Jesus is in a locked room a week or so after the resurrection. The first witness to the resurrection had been Mary Magdalene and possibly some of the other women. That would certainly fit with tradition and custom because at the first opportunity they would want to dress the body – there had been no time on the day Jesus died, the following day was the Sabbath so the third day was their first opportunity. Mary reports back to the disciples that she has seen the Lord. Interestingly Mark and Luke both record that the disciples did not believe her. John is silent on whether they believed her or not. Women were not considered to be reliable witnesses so John needs further evidence to produce to his readers.

That same evening all the remaining disciples, apart from Thomas, are gathered in a locked room presumably because they feared for their lives. Mary has given what seems to them a ridiculous account of having met Jesus when suddenly he is standing there in the room with them. As if to convince them he shows them his pierced hands and side. We have no idea where Thomas was – maybe fetching fish and chips for supper – it doesn't matter. The ten disciples later relate to Thomas what they have seen – remember they have seen for themselves Jesus's wounds. Thomas, ever the practical, wants to see the wounds for himself. In those same circumstances, just two days after Jesus had been seen to die on a cross, pre Ascension, pre Pentecost - how would we have reacted? Impossible to say but I think we also might have wanted more evidence than simply a possible garbled report from a confused and frightened bunch of mortals.

Next we know it is a whole week later. We have no idea of what happened in between, what conversations had gone on. A week is a long time. Maybe the ten who had witnessed Jesus's first appearance were beginning to have niggling doubts. We all know how difficult it can be to recall the details of an event after it has happened, particularly when we have been taken by surprise. Witness accounts given in a court of law can be notoriously unreliable if not corroborated with hard evidence. This time all the disciples are present, including Thomas, when Jesus appears to them again. Jesus shows Thomas the wounds in his resurrected body and invites him to touch them. John's narrative (remember he was there) does not tell us whether or not Thomas did touch. Thomas's response is a simple but powerful creedal statement "My Lord and my God." Jesus's response does not seem to me to be a rebuke to Thomas though some have understood it as such. Jesus says "Because you have seen me you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed.". It is a statement of fact Thomas has seen the resurrected Jesus and believed without equivocation. Others, maybe influenced by his testimony, will come to believe even though they did not see his resurrected body. So John's original gospel narrative comes to an end – there is a further chapter which takes place on the banks of Lake Galilee and includes the commissioning of Peter but that is widely believed to have been added later.

John is believed to have written his gospel account some years after the other writers, maybe 50 or 60 years after the resurrection. John was by now an old man and was probably living in Ephesus. He began with the wonderful words that we often hear at Christmas "In the beginning was the Word...." The Word, the Logos, Jesus – John sets out clearly and concisely the Christology of Jesus, his relationship with the Father as part of the Godhead and his relationship to the world. At the beginning of his letter that we call 1 John – probably written from Ephesus at the same sort of time as his gospel and part of which we heard earlier from Eugene Peterson's *The Message* – John starts to explain something of what that means for those that believe in Jesus.

But in his gospel writing he goes much further and over 20 chapters he attempts to describe to those who read his words the person of Jesus. He relates eight miracles that Jesus performed. He records the seven "I am" statements of Jesus. He describes the events of the final week in Jesus's life - the triumphal entry, the last supper, the betrayal

and arrest, the trial and the crucifixion culminating in the death of Jesus. John records how Mary Magdalene found the empty tomb and assumed that Jesus's body had been removed or stolen. He records Mary's encounter with Jesus in the garden. At first she fails to recognise him but then the truth dawns and her immediate reaction is to tell the other disciples that Jesus is alive. Jesus appears to all the disciples, except Thomas, in the upper room. He shows them his wounds. John wants to make it abundantly clear that this is a full body resurrection, it is no ghost or apparition. What they are seeing is 100% Jesus. And it could have ended there. John has recorded two witness accounts of the resurrected Jesus. He has made his case for Jesus but there is one more witness to call. Thomas, the ever practical, not one to be swayed by the crowd, wants to see for himself. When Jesus appears to him there is no hesitancy, there is no further questioning. Thomas sees the resurrected Jesus and declares, without equivocation, "My Lord and my God."

So, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I have made my case and now I leave you to draw your own conclusions. Is 'Doubting Thomas' a fair and accurate name for history to have ascribed to this apostle? Or should he more accurately be ascribed perhaps the name 'Visionary Thomas' or 'Faithful Thomas' or perhaps just Thomas is sufficient. Whichever you decide then never let it serve as a distraction from his pronouncement in the locked room in the company of Jesus and the ten. Thomas shared up to three years with Jesus – his faith was rocky at times but in the end he was able to declare quite unequivocally "My Lord and my God!"

John has a singular purpose in writing, for which he is totally unapologetic and which he states at the very end of chapter 20, where the original book is believed to have ended – "...these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ. The Son of God, and by believing you may have life in his name." John began with "In the beginning..." and he reaches the climax with Thomas's declaration "My Lord and my God!" John takes his readers on a journey which begins with Jesus's relationship with the world, with mankind and ends with the personal relationship which is for all who choose to believe in him. And Thomas's declaration is one that each of us is invited, if we wish, to declare for ourselves "My Lord and my God!"

Hymn: Sing/ Read /pray /proclaim the words

StF 296 Christ has risen while Earth slumbers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HgTDemu84MU>

Prayers of intercession:

We pray for those for whom the good news of Easter is just too good to be true; for those who long to believe, but are looking for proof where none can be given, except to the eye of faith; for those who will only accept what can be seen or touched or scientifically proved; for those who dare not believe because of the challenge to their

whole way of thinking and the changes it would require them to make to their whole way of living. May the risen Christ touch their hearts with his grace.

We ask our prayer ***In the name of Christ.***

We pray for those who have lost confidence and courage; for those for whom hope is gone and joy has withered away; for those for whom life no longer holds any promise and each day is a burden too much to bear; for those who are ill and those who are dying, those who care for them and those who ignore them; for those whose lives are empty, and with the passing years have lost meaning; for the lonely, alone and confused. We pray in particular for those named on our notice sheet and in the silence those known to us who are ill or otherwise in need of prayer.....May the risen Christ give them his peace.

We ask our prayer ***In the name of Christ.***

We pray for the Church and all Christians; for those who live in dark places and who suffer persecution – in one of its many guises - for their faith; for those who are living and worshipping as if Christ is not risen but is still in the tomb; for those who struggle with their faith whose daily lives continually fall short.

We ask our prayer ***In the name of Christ.***

We pray for our world and for those filled with hatred and despair; for those who settle for instant pleasure rather than risk opening their lives to the power of Christ; for those whose lives are ruined as they clothe their existence with addictions that promise everything now for a moment; and for those who never hear of | God's offer of life in abundance and his promise of heaven because we do not tell them. May the risen Christ open blind eyes and sealed lips.

We ask our prayer ***In the name of Christ.***

We pray for ourselves. Lord, give us a new joy in your presence and a new awareness that you are alive. Give us the courage to name your name with our lives and our lips. So fill us we pray with your joy and power, with your love and your grace, with a trust in your dying and an experience of your rising, that our lives will simply overflow for your glory. May we have the joy of leading someone to the foot of the empty cross to find their Saviour and to the empty tomb to discover their Lord.

We ask our prayer ***In the name of Christ.***

Merciful Father accept these prayers which are offered in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. **Amen**

**Hymn: Sing/ Read /pray /proclaim the words
StF 327 Jesus is King and I will extol him**

Final prayer & Blessing:

Christ's peace be with us in all that we do.

Christ's peace be with us in all that we are.

Christ's peace be with us in all that we will be.

This day and for evermore.

Amen.