

Sunday 19th April 2020
Glynde Lutheran Church
Theme: “**Believing Thomas.**” based John 20:24 – 31
by Pastor Richard Haar

Don't you feel a little bit sorry for Thomas? Every time we refer to him, we use his nickname, “**doubting**” Thomas. This is both a little unfair and in many ways it misses the whole point of this story from John 20.

It's unfair to keep calling Thomas by his nickname, “doubting” Thomas for two reasons. Firstly, why single out Thomas for his failure to immediately believe that Jesus had risen again? If we look closely at the Easter narratives, we very quickly see a pattern of bewilderment, misunderstanding and **doubt** by nearly **all** of Jesus' followers. And secondly, while it's true that Thomas did doubt at first, he eventually ended up believing that Jesus was alive again and clearly confessed his trust in him. So it might actually be fairer to call him, “**believing**” Thomas?

In Mark's Gospel it tells how the women, who went to the tomb and heard from the angels that Jesus had been raised, initially didn't quite know what to make of all this. In Mark 16:8 we read, “*Trembling and **bewildered**, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because **they were afraid.***”

Mark goes on to say that eventually Mary did tell the disciples about what had happened and what the angels had said about Jesus being raised to life again, but what was their reaction? Mark 16:11 says, “*When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, **they did not believe it.***” Luke's Gospel records the same initial lack of belief by the disciples in chapter 24:9-11, “*When they [the women] came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others ... But **they did not believe the women**, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.*”

But wait, there's more: Mark goes on to tell how the disciples received a second report about Jesus being alive again. Surely they'd be convinced this time? Mark 16:12-13 suggests otherwise: “*Afterwards Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country. These returned and reported it to the rest **but they did not believe them either.***”

Mark brings all this to a climax when he reports what the risen Jesus said to his disciples, when he directly appeared to them. Mark 16:14 says, *“Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he **rebuked them for their lack of faith** and their **stubborn refusal to believe** those who had seen him after he had risen.”*

Clearly, Thomas wasn't the only one to initially doubt that Jesus was alive again! That's why it's more than a little unfair to just remember Thomas' doubts, as if he were the only one to struggle to get his head around the news of Jesus' resurrection. Also take note how I deliberately emphasised the word “initially” here. Yes, Thomas initially doubted. But that's not the whole of the story. He eventually believed and that's the part of the story that's often left out and forgotten when we keep calling him “**doubting**” **Thomas**.

That means that one possible “take home” message for you from all this, is that: if at times you find yourself wrestling with your faith, you are not alone! And maybe the account of Thomas' doubts can give us some help with our own doubts and questions.

Luke 24:36-39 records what happened when the risen Jesus appeared to his disciples: *“While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them ‘Peace be with you.’ They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, ‘Why are you troubled, and **why do doubts rise in your minds?**’ Look at my hands and feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have’.”*

Compare all this with our passage from John 20, when Thomas said that he wouldn't believe the other disciples that Jesus had risen, *unless* he could see for himself the nail marks in Jesus' hands and put his fingers in Jesus' hands and side. Thomas was only wanting to test out the truth of all this, in much the same way that Jesus himself had suggested!

OK, what can we learn from all this **doubting** stuff? Firstly, it's important to realise that the disciples were flawed human beings, just like we are. They weren't “super-Christians”; just ordinary folk. There's no small comfort in knowing that, especially when we ourselves struggle to believe or have all sorts of questions in our faith life.

Secondly, the initial doubts by Thomas, and by the rest of the disciples, actually **add** to the credibility of their eventual conviction and witness that Jesus had indeed been raised. These were hard-nosed, knock-about fishermen and sensible down-to-earth blokes, who weren't at all gullible about life nor easily dubbed into believing any old thing. The fact that they were initially sceptical, supports the veracity and truthfulness of the story. In other words, because they initially doubted, it makes it easier for us to believe that it's all true about Jesus being raised. They weren't conned. They weren't hallucinating. It wasn't wish-fulfilment. It really happened!

So we probably should expand Thomas' nickname of "doubting" Thomas to the fuller version of "used to be doubting but now believing" Thomas (admittedly, a bit of a mouthful!) And friends, precisely because Thomas turns out to be such a credible witness, we can now not only legitimately rename him "believing" Thomas but, with good reason, we can also believe his witness. In other words, the phrase "believing Thomas" can also mean: **us** believing Thomas, that is, us believing his witness to the risen Christ.

Thirdly, and most importantly, we need to be very clear that Thomas moved from doubt to faith, **not by his own strength**. Picture the scene: when Jesus appeared to Thomas the following week, he invited Thomas to put it to the test – to actually put his finger in Jesus' hands and sides! And then came the critical moment. Jesus said to Thomas, "Stop doubting and believe." Now, it's possible to hear that as a rebuke, but that's not what's really happening! Jesus' command to stop doubting and believe, has the power to bring about exactly what he commands. It was through **Jesus' word that Thomas believed**. In fact, Thomas goes on to make the clearest confession about the true identity of Jesus in the whole of John's Gospel. Thomas calls Jesus, "My Lord and my God!"

At Jesus' word, Thomas believed. God's Word has the power to create faith in our hearts. In fact, that's what's happening for us today too – right now as we hear this word from God, Jesus is calling us to believe in him. And not only inviting us to do so. Not only commanding us to do so. But, gloriously, he is **enabling** us to do so!

The key "take-home" message here, is that when you're struggling in your faith, **listen to the risen Jesus**, who is present with us and continues to speak to us in his Word. Don't try to make yourself believe. Rather listen to the Scriptures, which have the power to give you the faith you need. Cry out to God to help you to believe and be confident that he will!

Let me say that again: when you're full of doubts and questions and you're struggling, cry out to God and ask him to strengthen your faith. And turn to the Scriptures to hear God speak to you. John tells us that this is precisely what the purpose and goal was of him writing his Gospel: In verse 29, we read that Jesus said to Thomas, *"Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."* Here Jesus is talking about you and me. **We** today are the ones who are blessed, because we believe that Jesus has risen and we trust in him as our Saviour. In verse 31, John goes on to explain that *"these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."*

So when we doubt and struggle in our Christian lives, what are we to do? I would encourage you to be **honest** about your doubts and struggles. But don't just admit to them; intentionally bring them to Jesus. Learn this lesson from Thomas: be real about your doubts, but don't stop there. **Bring your doubts to the Word!** Hear again the story of Jesus and be blessed as God's powerful Word once again speaks to your life and enters into your heart. Turn to the Word and let it strengthen and renew your confidence in the truth of the risen Jesus, who is our Saviour – so that you might have life in his name!

We are **Easter** people! We are people, who believe in the resurrection of Jesus and the new life he brings. We are Easter people, who trust in God's merciful forgiveness and in God's loving presence with us, in all the ups and downs of life. We are Easter people, who face the present ambiguous and uncertain times, living with **hope** for the future – no matter what! Even when we have doubts ...

Friends, this Easter season, God continue to bring you peace and joy in the new life that we have in the risen Christ. All glory to him – our Lord and our God! Amen.