



Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

Available in printed form and online at:
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Issue 56

Sunday 11th April 2021

Today's reading

John 20: 19–31 (“Jesus appears to his disciples”)

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord.’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.’

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.’ Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’ Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. Amen.
(*NRSV*)

Today's hymns

- 1 *Morning has broken* (CH:212)
- 2 *The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want* (CH:14; tune: Wiltshire)
- 3 *There's a wideness in God's mercy* (CH:187)
- 4 *Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father* (CH:153)
- 5 *Thy hand, O God, has guided* (CH:511)

In the Name of the Father and of

What do we know about Thomas the Twin? The first thing we know is that his nickname didn't last. Like Thomas the Tank Engine, so too Thomas the Twin has quite a nice ring to it. It rolls off the tongue and would have served rather neatly as a way of remembering something about this little-known disciple.

But it was not to be. All the way down the history of the Church, Thomas the Twin has not been known by his family identity. Rather he has become famous – some might even say infamous – due to his need for proof:

'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

And so Thomas the Twin took on an altogether different nickname, that of “Doubting” Thomas. And that is pretty much all that he is remembered for today, 20 centuries on. He may have been a key member of the twelve disciples. He may have been a great guy, helpful in all things and with a fine sense of humour. Thomas might have had a whole lot of good things going on in his life, yet, because of his demand for proof of the Resurrection, he has come down to us as the disciple who doubted.

That's what little we know of the man, so how do we assess him? What are we to make of a disciple whose need for firm evidence apparently outweighed his belief in Christ?

First things first: if we think back over the arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus, I would reckon we might say that Thomas was not the only one to have had his doubts. At the very least, the other 11 followers in Jesus' inner circle really didn't show themselves to be firmly rooted in the more important aspects of their faith.

As we saw last week, from Thursday night right up to Easter Day they had vanished off the scene. Had they held any deep confidence in their master and friend, surely they would have done a whole lot more to show how firm, how staunch that faith would be in the face of opposition. Who failed? Not one in 12, but *all* 12 – every last one of them. So it seems very likely that Thomas was far from being the only one in this story to be filled with mind-numbing doubt and deep uncertainty over what had just happened.

You might recall how at our Good Friday service, Frances and I spoke about the benefits offered to a human life by temptation which is first experienced, then endured, and ultimately overcome and mastered. Our response to temptation will determine what we make of it. And (of course) what temptation makes of us. I wonder if something similar can be said for doubt: not the kind of doubt that makes folk wishy-washy in their faith, but the kind of doubt – real doubt, honest doubt – which can be lived through and harnessed and put to good advantage in assessing belief and, ultimately, in strengthening a living faith.

Thomas, I would say, is someone we can relate to as “one of us”. Just like many a sincere believer, he has a foundation of belief coupled with a threshold of doubt. The gospel writer John tells us that, for whatever reason, Thomas had been absent when the other disciples had found the Risen Christ coming to them and standing among them. After having greeted those 10, we are told that Jesus went on to show them all his hands and his side. Why? Why do this for the group of friends? Surely because he must have known the doubt which had assailed and assaulted each one. And so, addressing a deep human need, Jesus offered the very proof which would mean so much to them both then and in time to come. Yes, he had been crucified. Yes, he had died upon that that cross. And now he was back.

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

Later, with the return of Thomas, that little gathering joyfully reported that they had seen the Risen Lord. Good News for them. In fact, it is impossible for us to guess at the crescendo of joy that must have enveloped that group of mourners when visited by new hope on that first evening of the week. Not so for Thomas though. He was adamant that he wanted proof (and pretty much the same level of proof that the others had been given): *'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'*

The truth is that Thomas only wanted what the others had already experienced: a firm, practical demonstration that Jesus, who once had been dead, had indeed risen to new life. It should be noted that Thomas goes that one stage further, saying that he wanted not just to see but also to *touch*. And which of us would blame him for that?

We all have our doubts, and a great many of them, some deeply theological, others much more practical and down to earth:

- Does God exist? Or is faith all an illusion?;
- Is the Bible reliable? And, if so, in which ways should we read it and understand it?;
- You've got a new job, but will you ever be able to face up to the challenges which await? Or will you fall at the first hurdle;
- The scientists and the medical community are doing an incredible job, but will this pandemic *ever* be over?

Doubt goes with us through all of life, and it is hard for us to imagine what Thomas was going through as he wrestled with his thoughts and with his shoogily faith. But then we are told that one week later, Jesus appeared again. This time, Thomas was there and was given exactly what he had asked for seven nights earlier: the opportunity to see *and* to touch.

What is interesting here is that we never find out whether Thomas actually took up the offer to see and to touch. All we are told is that the encounter with Jesus was itself sufficient proof for the man who had voiced his doubts so passionately. Very simply, Thomas answered Jesus with a five-word declaration of total faith: "My Lord and my God!"

That bold pronouncement is, in fact, the very last thing we hear from Thomas in the whole of the Bible, and this makes me reflect more than a little on the rough ride which this disciple has had over two millennia of Church history. Had it been wrong for Thomas to doubt? I would say that it had been very *human* for him to doubt. Like all the rest of us, Thomas is human, and all-too-human. But let's just turn this around a little. While that skeptical Thomas had been crystal clear that he needed proof of the Resurrection, when actually meeting face to face with the Risen Christ his conviction became galvanized in an instant, his faith being proclaimed with utter confidence: "My Lord and my God!"

Let's finish with the very end of this encounter, and some words of Jesus which can seem a little puzzling but which, I suspect, can point us well and truly in the right direction. Christ poses a question to Thomas, and immediately afterwards offers a reassurance which echoes down the ages to our own often-doubting ears:

'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

Yes, through Easter then and now, the unseeing Church is blessed by belief. *We* are blessed. Amen.

Praying for others

Lord Christ,
today we pray for those who, like Thomas,
find it hard to believe,
who feel their faith slipping through their fingers.

We ask you to bless those so exhausted
that they struggle to find the energy for faith.

We bring before you healthcare workers across the globe,
working so hard to protect the rest of us
from the ravages of Covid-19 and other diseases.

We pray for those who have to work every waking minute
to grow a meagre harvest from unfruitful land
or who slave away, often literally,
in factories in appalling conditions.

We ask that you send your Spirit
to restore and refresh their faith.

Let them feel you near them,
as near as Thomas did so many years ago.

We ask these things in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

And finally . . .

Abigail Morrison considers springtime blooming, in more ways than one:

Here we are a week after Easter 2021. Spring has sprung – but winter seems to have immediately followed it. Like many of us I have been enjoying watching plants in my garden slowly wake up, poking their heads above ground, unfurling fresh green leaves. Then I wait while buds form and oh-so-slowly open to beautiful flowers.

I can be somewhat impatient. Sometimes waiting for a flower to open feels like watching a kettle boil – it seems to take an absolute age. I go out each day and the buds still seem to be as far on as the day before and no further. And then suddenly I pop out and a whole tree has burst into bloom while my back was turned.

It occurs to me that coming out of the lockdown restrictions we labour under just now is much the same. We seem to come out so very slowly. Now we can meet two people from one household outside rather than just one – but still no-one indoors. Schools are back – but then they are on holiday. Some “click and collect” is open – but you can’t drive out of East Lothian to collect anything.

Every day feels like a week since the last easing of lockdown but it feels no different. But I know that, suddenly, enough restrictions will have been lifted that it feels much freer. We’ll be able to see friends and family both in and out of doors in reasonable numbers. We will be able to shop when and where we like. We will be allowed to go for a coffee, lunch, or dinner in a café or restaurant. We will be permitted to travel anywhere in the UK to see our loved ones.

The post-Covid bloom will suddenly open.