

Sermon Easter 1 - April 7 2024

Part of a Series, "Oh Death, Where is Thy Sting?"

Dean Stephen Hance

Poor Thomas. "Doubting Thomas". How would you like that name to follow you for 2000 years? Talk about labelling someone. Thomas, who took the Gospel to India and died a martyr's death, known almost entirely for what he says in today's Gospel reading, words he almost certainly regretted. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

Our Gospel passage begins and it's still Easter Day. Remember, Peter and John had seen the empty tomb, wondered at what it all meant, and then gone home. Mary Magdalene alone had stayed near the tomb, and so been the only one to meet the Risen Christ herself. She had gone to where the disciples were gathered and declared to them, "I have seen the Lord." The first post-resurrection appearance of Jesus according to John.

And today we get two more. The first happens later that same day. The disciples are gathered together, ten of them. Confused, fearful, doors locked in case the authorities wanted to come for them too. No Judas anymore, and no Thomas. Jesus appears to them in that room and speaks with them. More than that, he commissions them – "as the Father sent me so I send you". And then he equips them, anoints them, breathes God's breath into them – "receive the Holy Spirit." And Thomas misses it all.

How would you feel, I wonder? The ten are beside themselves with joy. "We have seen the Lord!" – that phrase again. But you missed out. How do you feel? I'm guessing the answer is, angry. The tone of Thomas' comment – "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" – doesn't strike me as doubting first of all, but as angry. His fellow apostles are on cloud nine, but not Thomas. He hasn't had the experience they have had. He is just where he was. Thomas has been left behind in his grief.

I have come to realise over the years how much anger there is in grief. Grief at the death of another, certainly. But also grief over the loss of a job, of a relationship, of something important to us that has gone. You probably know this from your own experience. Grief and anger are closely related and it's anger that makes Thomas spit out those words for which he is best known.

Now roll the film forwards. It takes us by surprise, this, because for the last however many chapters we have almost minute-by-minute coverage. And now the text suddenly goes, "One week later." What were they doing for that week? Did they leave the house, do some fishing, huddle at home and talk, pray? No idea. A week skips past. And again, when we are in grief, time can take on that elastic nature. A day seems to last an eternity. A week slips by and we don't know where it went. So here we are. Next Sunday. This time it's the eleven who are there, Thomas, angry, grieving Thomas, included. And Jesus appears again. The third resurrection appearance.

Rather awkwardly for Thomas, Jesus seems to know what he said last week.

"Come on 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 doesn't need to do that. Seeing with his own eyes is enough. Grief is gone. Anger has gone. Doubt has gone. "My Lord and my God."

I mentioned last Sunday that we are running a series of sermons and Tuesday gatherings this month under the heading "Oh death, where is thy sting?" Part of the purpose of the series is to help us think through some of those complicated issues around planning for the end of our own lives. One of the few things we know with absolute certainty is that we will all die. We don't know how or when but we know it will happen. Some of us probably think about this a fair bit. Others try never to think about it at all. But we can't deny it out of existence. It is coming to each of us. And before it does, more than likely, we are going to have to deal with the deaths of others, people we love. That worries some of us much more than the prospect of our own deaths. These are huge issues, and sadly we live in a culture which shies away from them. In a culture where almost nothing is taboo, death most certainly is. We don't have safe spaces to talk about death and our feelings about it, nor to think through the

preparations we want to make for when our own time comes. So we live in denial, or pretence.

This series, and our Tuesday gatherings particularly, are about creating space to address this in a warm and safe and pastoral environment, and I hope you will participate if you can.

But because we are a Christian church we want to have these conversations in the light of good theology. What does our faith tell us about these things?

I want to suggest that there are 5 helpful things we can take away from this story and apply to our thinking about death and dying. They don't answer all our questions, but they do at least provide a context in which those questions can be asked.

First, we learn that the resurrection body is a physical body. Jesus is physically present. He isn't a ghost. When Mary and the others visit the tomb, it is empty. The body has gone because Jesus has been raised. In the end Thomas doesn't touch Jesus wounds – he doesn't need to, but he could. This is a physical resurrection, as will ours be.

But second, it's a transformed body. Jesus entered a room through locked doors. That's not something he had made a habit of before. When Mary sees him – when the two disciples on the Emmaus Road see him – they don't immediately recognise him. Something has changed. The resurrection body is a transformed, physical body.

Third, we learn there is no shame in doubting. I have said I think Thomas was more grieving, more angry than doubting. But there is doubt there too, and Jesus doesn't tell him off for it. In fact he gives him the chance to put his doubts to rest. And similarly, there is no shame in grieving. As a pastor I have a deep hatred for that kind of Christian jollity in the face of death. It always feels forced to me. Death sucks. It's awful. Heartbreaking. And there is no shame in grieving it or being angry when it comes calling.

Fourth, there is blessing in believing. Jesus said to Thomas, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.' Thomas is blessed. We are more blessed because, whatever our doubts or anxieties, we believe without having seen the Risen Lord.

Fifth, and finally, we learn something of Jesus' purpose for us, his prayer for us, in the midst of grief and loss and anger.

Verse 19, the disciples are locked away in fear, and Jesus says, "Peace be with you."

Verse 21, "Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you.'"

And a week later, "Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'"

Three times in half a chapter. 'Peace be with you'. I think we can conclude that Jesus wants us to have peace.

This peace isn't pretence, that death and loss and grief are not awful after all, or that we have no doubts or questions. It's a tougher, more robust thing than that. It's a peace that is big enough to hold the grief and the doubt and the anger and know that, however we try to answer our questions, and even if our answers are all wrong, Jesus and his peace are still with us, still for us. In the pain and the confusion of death, peace be with you.

We live in a world which has experienced more than we could have imagined of loss and darkness over recent years, and still today. Christians are not immune from any of that. But because of the resurrection we remain people of peace. The resurrection of Jesus promises us that death doesn't have the last word. As Paul writes:

"Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being."

We may not understand all that. Questions, doubts remain. But in the midst of those questions and doubts, in our grief and our anger, Jesus comes alongside and says, "Because I am raised, you will be raised, and those you love will be raised. And so, peace be with you."