

I usually preach on John 20 on the Sunday after Easter, but this year this passage seems especially appropriate, because it addresses the issue of doubt. Thomas is the disciple that we associate with doubt; so much that we still use the term: *Doubting Thomas*. I feel so sorry for Thomas because all we learn about him from the gospels is that he doubted Jesus' resurrection. It's only in John's Gospel that Thomas emerges as a distinct personality, and apart from the disbelief of the disciples on Easter Sunday, it only appears to be Thomas who continued to doubt Jesus' resurrection.

Thomas wasn't with the disciples when Jesus first appeared to them, he only heard about this from the disciples. Thomas was hearing of Jesus' return from others and he refused to believe it. Maybe he was the forerunner of modern day cynicism, perhaps this news just sounded too good to be true. Thomas said: Unless I feel the nail prints in his hands I will not believe. Poor Thomas, he had separated himself from the disciples and in his solitude, he had missed this first resurrection appearance.

There is something interesting for us to consider here. I wonder if John is suggesting that Christ appears most often within the community of believers that we call church, and when we separate ourselves from the church; we take a chance on missing his unique presence. And if this is what John is suggesting, then what does that say about the times we are going through when we are unable to meet as a church? I'll come back to this question.

Back to poor Thomas and note that Jesus didn't blame Thomas for doubting. So often the church's handling of doubt, is to couple it with disbelief and squash it. But Jesus never condemned Thomas. I think Jesus understood that once Thomas worked through his doubts, his faith would be complete and his witness powerful.

I must admit that I'm dubious of people who say that they've never had doubts. I'd go so far as to suggest that any person who places themselves beyond doubt, places themselves above Christ himself. Remember that Jesus cried out; Father, why have you forsaken me? As He was dying an excruciating death, even Jesus had doubts.

Authentic faith always begins with intellectual honesty, and doubt is the bedrock of honesty. Let me put this in another way: Faith is not the absence of doubt; it's the overcoming of doubt. I have had doubts. When standing at a funeral listening to cries of families who've lost someone dear to them, I've thought silently to myself: Is the resurrection a reality? Are the cynic's rights? Then I'm reminded of times when I have seen people healed, when I witnessed people being transformed through Christ and His Holy Spirit. I'm can associate with Thomas far easier than I can with someone who has never had a doubt in their lives.

Jesus doesn't rebuke Thomas but He does suggest that He has missed out because of his doubts. Jesus said: *Thomas, you have believed because you have seen. Blessed are those who have not seen yet still believe.* I don't know how that makes you feel but it seems Jesus is talking about you and I. We will never see Jesus in this life or touch his scarred hands or pierced side. It can never be proven to us that Jesus was raised from the dead. Jesus understands it's harder for us to believe than for Thomas, and He counts us blessed because of this.

Here's a question: How can we conclusively prove the qualities of love, friendship or faith? How can we establish beyond doubt our devotion to our family or dear friends? Show me verifiable evidence that love exists. How can you prove to someone that we love Christ and our church? And yet, some would say that to love someone or something we have never seen is irrational. But to live in a purely rationalistic world, one where miracles are removed from our way of thinking is to live in a cold world without hope, without emotion, without God himself.

To live with absolute certainty can be a dark place to live. Yes, I have my doubts at times but they soon subside when I realise that Jesus is alive, and this gives hope that the church can be alive because of Him. There are times when we have to move through our doubt to faith. It's all right to doubt, but in our discipleship we should move beyond doubt. Jesus admonished Thomas: *Stop doubting and believe.*

Unbelief is a normal part of life but it's not healthy to remain in unbelief. Charles Spurgeon was a powerful Baptist preacher in the late 19th century. Spurgeon writes of going to live in Newcastle, which at that time was a dirty industrial town. As he was looking around the house he was considering renting, the landlord took him to the upper room and took him over to a window. *There*, he said as he pointed out the window, *over there you can see Durham Cathedral on a Sunday.* Spurgeon asked: *Why on a Sunday? Because* said the landlord, *the furnaces are not working on Sunday and there is no smoke and you can therefore see farther.*

When we come to worship on Sunday morning we come to see further than this church. When we gather in worship we come to see into the heart of God. I want to say something this morning, and I'm saying this to myself as well. There are times in our lives when we face grief, or disappointment, or pain or depression. There are times when these things happen that our hold on God falters. When these moments of real deep doubt come, let me give something to remember, and this was something told to me and it's gotten me through many dark times. If you remember nothing about the sermon this morning accept this thought: ***Never doubt in the dark, what God has told you in the light. Never doubt in the dark, what God has told you in the light!***

I say this because it is in moments of spiritual light, that God shows us true reality. These moments of spiritual light are so important because they equip us to get through the dark nights of doubt and despair, like the times we are living through today and cause doubts.

In moments of light, God has told us that He will never desert us and we should never doubt that. In moments of light, God has told us that Jesus is alive, the resurrection is reality; and don't ever let the darkness cause us to doubt that.

I said that I would return to the possibility of John suggesting that if Christ appears most often within the community of believers that we call church, then it follows that when we separate ourselves from the church; we take a chance on missing Christ's unique presence. I don't think this is what John was suggesting at all, and I don't want us to be thinking that because we can't come to church, then we are separated from Jesus.

The answer that squashes this suggestion is found in this passage from John 20. Verse 21 and 22: **Jesus said, *Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. And with that he breathed on them and said, Receive the Holy Spirit.*** Jesus knew He wouldn't be with His disciples, and not just the original 12; but His disciples throughout time. So Jesus left us with His Holy Spirit. Jesus has left us with His Word, the Bible. Jesus has given us the gift of prayer and through technology, we have the ability to stay in contact with each other during this time of isolation.

Friends, we are not living in darkness because we are people of the light. Jesus came to be light of the world and if we are His followers, we walk in His light. There are days we walk with our doubts, but I pray they will pass and will give way to a life giving faith in Christ because He has risen. And let me close with the words Jesus said to Thomas: *You have believed because you have seen. Blessed are those who have not seen yet still believe.* My prayer for you all, is that you are Blessed. **Amen.**

(1430 words)