Thomas Encounters Christ
John 20:24-31

Over the last few Sundays, we've been looking at Jesus' resurrection appearances. And most commentators agree that this appearance of Jesus to Thomas, is *the* climax of John's gospel. Because John tells us about Thomas but then immediately writes, v30, 'Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book…' Which tells us John's been selective in the ones he has told us about. And what comes next, in chapter 21, is really just a mopping up exercise with the restoration of Peter. But it's here, with Thomas, that John draws things to a finale.

So, if he's got all this other material he could have told us about Jesus, why end with Thomas? And you could say, it's Pastor John telling us, 'never miss a Sunday!' Verse 24, 'Now, Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came.' He skipped a Sunday, and look what happened. You don't want to be absent when Jesus shows!

Which is true, but it's not what John's saying. Because look what he does say, v31, 'but these [the events I *have* chosen to tell you about] are written *so that* you may believe.' And if you noticed, the issue of believing runs like a thread through this encounter, doesn't it? And Thomas is like a representative of anyone reading this gospel who does not yet believe, but like him can come to believe.

But there lies a problem, doesn't it? Because today, being certain of your beliefs is not necessarily seen as a virtue, is it? So that's what we're going to look at: The problem of belief, the necessity of belief, the grounds for belief, the confession of belief, and the fruit of belief.

The Problem of Belief
I don't know if you've read Robert Harris' novel *Conclave*, or seen the film, but it's set around the election of a new pope. And - spoiler alert - let's just say the ending is one for our culturally confused times. But not just the ending. In the film, Cardinal Lawrence, played by Ralph Fiennes, preaches a sermon on the eve of voting, in which he says, "Certainty is the great enemy of unity. Certainty is the deadly enemy of tolerance… Our faith is a living thing precisely because it walks hand-in-hand with doubt. If there was only certainty and no doubt, there would be no mystery. And therefore, no need for faith. Let us pray that God will grant us a Pope who doubts."

And today, doubt is seen as good, as authentic. And it's certainty, it's conviction, that's dangerous. Because look at the terrible things that happen when people are sure of their beliefs. As Cardinal Lawrence says, it becomes the deadly enemy of tolerance.

And in such a world, Thomas - or *Doubting* Thomas as he's come to be called - becomes the exemplary, authentic self. The patron saint of doubters. A safe and acceptable kind of believer. And I don't know if it was deliberate or not, but in the book Cardinal Lawrence's character was actually called Cardinal Lomeli - Jacopo Lomeli. But for the film it was changed to Lawrence - Cardinal *Thomas* Lawrence. The cardinal who himself is struggling with doubts.

But of course, this idea that certainty and conviction in belief are dangerous, and doubt is good, begins to unravel, doesn't it, when you begin to realise *that* conviction is also a belief, a belief held with certainty by those who hold it.

And so the problem is not with belief. It's with *what* you believe. And *does* John present Thomas to us as an example? Yes. But not an example of someone trapped in a no-mans land of doubt, but one who comes through to a firm and certain faith.

You see, up until now, if you read the gospels, Thomas has not been any more doubtful than any of the other disciples. If we wanted to accuse him of anything we could accuse him of being a pessimist, an Eeyore, but like Puddleglum the Marshwiggle in CS Lewis' Narnia he is a loyal pessimist. But here, he is deeply skeptical of the other disciples' claims.

Verse 25, 'So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."'

But can you blame him? I mean, he saw Jesus die. He saw the wounds. And he knows dead people don't rise. So is he a rationalist materialist? Yes. But he also just wants what they've had: concrete, touchable, physical evidence. And he gets it.

Because in medicine there's an expression, 'never say never in medicine.' If you say, something *never* happens in such and such a condition, you're probably about to be proved wrong. And so when Thomas says, 'I will never believe' - well, that's fighting talk where Jesus comes from, isn't it?

The Necessity of Belief

Verse 26, 'Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

Now, if you want to go see a concert or a musical, and you can't go on one night but you can on another, you don't worry about it, do you - because you know the performance is going to be almost identical. And what happens here is like a repeat performance from the previous Sunday isn't it? The disciples are together. The doors are locked. But Jesus, somehow, stands among them and speaks peace over them. Only this time, Thomas is there.

Verse 27, 'Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe."'

Now is that a rebuke? It sounds like one, doesn't it. Because it's not just an *invitation* to believe, it's a call, even a *command* to believe.

And John's open about it: he's written this whole book, including this passage, as a call to us, his readers, to believe. Because you're going to believe something, aren't you? You're going to build your life on one set of assumptions and beliefs about life, and death, or another. Like, what's the point of life? What does it mean to live the good life? Is there a God or is there not? Beliefs you cannot prove or verify in a lab. But you're going to build on something. It's unavoidable. It's inevitable. It's a necessary part of life.

And John is saying, look at Thomas, because like him, if you're not yet a Christian, when it comes to Christianity and the resurrection of Christ, you might be a skeptic. Like him you might

disbelieve. Or, if you are a Christian, you might have days of doubt. But the very thing Jesus rebukes him for not believing is the very thing all of us can and should believe.

The Grounds for Belief

Now, if you think about it, at the heart of this event is a contradiction. Because Jesus rebukes Thomas for not believing without seeing and touching, only to give Thomas exactly what he's been asking for, before then saying, blessed are those who don't get that.

Verse 29, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Ok, so why tell Thomas he should have believed without seeing, but then go ahead and let him see?

Well, ask yourself, what is it that Thomas should have believed? It's the testimony of the other disciples: v25, "We have seen the Lord." The message that they're going to go out into the world with, as apostles: we saw Jesus die and we have seen him raised to life again. Or as John puts it in the opening of his first letter: 'That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life - the life was made manifest, and we have seen and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life.' (1 John 1:1-2). But if Thomas is to join them, if he's also to go out with that message, he also needs to see.

And it's that apostolic eyewitness testimony that Thomas should have believed that we're also called to believe.

And hidden away in plain sight here is one reason why you should. You see, if you're skeptical, particularly about the gospels being eyewitnesses accounts you might say, 'yeh but there are loads of other gospels that tell a different story, that the church has tried to squash, like the Gospel of Thomas. Why should I believe this, and not that?'

So look at v24: 'Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them.' And the word translated there *Twin* is the Greek word *didymus,* which means… twin. And what does the name Thomas mean? It's the Aramaic for… twin. So Thomas was clearly a Twin.

Ok, what's that got to do with why you should believe this? Well, look at the opening to the so-called Gospel of Thomas, written in Egyptian Coptic: 'These are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke, and which Didymus Judas Thomas wrote down'. And as Peter Williams, Principle at Tyndale House Cambridge, points out that makes no sense, because it makes his name Twin Judas Twin. And only somebody who doesn't know what the words mean, or how names of the period worked, would write that. In other words, it wasn't written by Thomas or anyone else like him.

But as Peter Williams and others have published at length, the New Testament writers never make those kinds of mistakes. In fact, it's the opposite. Because the way they use names tells us they were writing with intimate, local, contemporary knowledge of how names were used in the time of Jesus.

And they argue that from archeological data we know that individual names varied greatly as to how common they were based not just on time but on place. So that what was a common name

among the first century Jewish population in Judea was different in comparison to similar Jewish populations in Egypt, or what's now Turkey, or Greece or Rome.

And what scholars like Williams have shown is that, without fail, the New Testament writers get it right. Because if a name was common, people of the time would need to add something so that you could distinguish that person from another with the same name, but you wouldn't if it wasn't.

I mean imagine someone writing a report about something that happened here in Westlake about now. If they gave all the characters names like Zhang and Wang, you could dismiss it out of hand. But what if they talked about Martin the Bald, and Noah the younger, and Micah and Hannah. If you read it in 2000 years time, you might think nothing of it. But, if you read it here and now you'd go, er which Hannah? Are we talking Hannah Pollard, Hannah Pillon, Hannah Storm, or Hannah Donaldson? And is it Micah Hadley or Micah Owens? And why Martin *the Bald* and Noah *the Younger?* - there's only one Martin, and there's only one Noah.

But, if the story just mentioned Martin and Noah *without* qualification, while every time a Hannah or a Micah got mentioned it *was* qualified, you'd think, ok this guy clearly knows what he's talking about. Because he could only know what he knows if he was actually part of that community at that time.

Which is exactly what you find with the New Testament writers. Every time there's a name which we now know to have been common at the time - like Simon, or Matthew, or James - it's Simon called Peter, or Simon the tanner; or it's Matthew the tax collector - even when there's no other Matthew in the story, and it's James the son of Zebedee, to distinguish them from the all the other Simons and Matthews and Jameses that were around. But with names like Philip and Bartholomew which we know were not common, there's never anything added, because why the need? But you'd only know that, if you knew that.

And the authors of our canonical gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John clearly did know that. While the author of the so-called gospel of Thomas did not.

So when Jesus says to Thomas, the real Thomas, Thomas the Twin, 'you should have believed your friends', he's saying the same to us: v27, "Do not disbelieve, but believe." And we've good reason to do so. Because what's in a name? Everything's in a name.

But there's another reason Thomas comes to believe, isn't there. Jesus says to him, v27, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side." But does Thomas do it? And most commentators argue, 'no', or at least he doesn't seem to. Instead, he exclaims, "My Lord and my God."

So why the rapid turn-around from skepticism to belief? Is it just that he does now physically see Jesus and that's enough for him - he doesn't actually need to physically touch him? Maybe. But think again about Thomas' original demand: v25, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe." And now here is Jesus saying, 'here I am Thomas - do it, here are my hands, stick your finger through the hole like you said you wanted. Here is my side, stick in your hand and see.'

And in that moment, what is it that dawns on Thomas? It's that Jesus knew. It's that Jesus was not there when he said those things but he now reports them back to him. It's that he had heard him, and knew him, and saw him. And who could know that, but God alone?

And so, like Thomas we can believe because of the apostolic testimony. But faith will also come as you lean into it; as you practice what it means to be a Christian. As you read the Bible, and pray, and come to church, and make use of the means of grace, as you look to Christ with faith - you will increasingly realise, this really is true, he really does know me, and he knows my heart and he knows my doubts and my fears, my dreams and my desires and he answers me like no-one else ever could.

And it's that experience that provokes Thomas' confession.

The Confession of Belief
Verses 27-28, "Do not disbelieve, but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

Now, if one of your friends spent everyday with you over a period of three years, do you think they'd be more likely to think you were God at the end of it than at the beginning? Or not at all?

And Thomas has spent three years with Jesus. But he's also Jewish. Think how staggering it is for a Jewish man to say what he says to a fellow man. What could have made him, or any of them, say that?

You see, John opened this gospel by telling us, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, *and the Word was God*.' (John 1:1). But now he brings it to a close with the words, 'My Lord and My God' on the lips of a man who just moments before was sure he was dead.

And notice, Jesus does not rebuke him. He doesn't say, 'you shouldn't say that sort of thing, Thomas, we're Jews; only God is God.' Instead he says, v29, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen yet have believed."

And those words are almost certainly still ringing in Peter's ears when a few years later he writes his first letter and says to his readers, 'Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible.' (1 Peter 1:8).

Because there is *propositional truth*: Jesus is Lord and God. But Thomas makes it personal: "*My* Lord and *my* God." And propositional truth *is* truth - but it's just in your head. But when it settles in your heart and begins to take root it becomes *personal truth*. Because this is about who you're loving and worshipping and giving your allegiance to.

And John is saying, that's why I've written this gospel, so that you can say the same. Verse 31, 'These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.' That you too can confess, *My* Lord and *My* God.

Because *Christ* means Messiah, the Lord and King in the line of David, come to put everything right. And read John's gospel and *Son of God* means the One equal with the Father, the One who could say 'before Abraham was, I AM.' God the Son.

And so is Thomas an example? You bet. But not of doubt. But of someone who believes and trusts and loves and worships.

And far from Cardinal Lawrence thinking such certainty is dangerous, what Jesus and John are telling us is that it will do you and others dangerous amounts of good.

The Fruit of Belief

Look again at v29, as Jesus says, "*Blessed* are those who have not seen and yet have believed." And v31, as John says. 'That by believing *you may have life* in his name.'

And, ultimately, they are talking about salvation and eternal life. But read John's gospel and you realise, when Jesus says he's come to give us life and life in all it's fullness, or that whom the Son sets free is free indeed, or if anyone is thirsty let him come to me and drink, he's talking about a quality of life that can be experienced and enjoyed *now*.

And given what's before us here, with Jesus showing Thomas his wounds, nowhere is that more true than if you too are wounded.

You see, Cardinal Lawrence and his like will tell you - doubt and uncertainty is what you need. But what good, what hope is that when you're hurting, or scarred, or carry the open wounds of life?

But when you know deep in your heart - 'the wounded one was wounded for me because he loves me. That the scarred one is alive and he rules and he reigns, and he's My Lord and My God, and his resurrection is just the beginning of him putting everything right', it will give you hope and life in this life.

But it'll also do good for others. You see, Cardinal Lawrence says certainty and faith are the great enemies of unity and the deadly enemies of tolerance. John and Jesus says, it's the opposite. Because who is our Lord and our God? The king who laid down his life for his people.

And what does that say to every husband? Lay down your life for your wife: love her like Christ loved the church.

And he's the king who died for his enemies, to make them his friends. So… love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you the Gospels say. And he's the king who gave himself in our place as our substitute so that we might be forgiven, so forgive as God in Christ forgave you, Paul says.

You see, the problem is not with faith and certainty. It's with what or who you're putting your faith and certainty in. The problem is not with belief. It's in what you believe. And the problem with the world is not too much Christianity, it's too little.

So, believe the apostolic testimony, and experience the truth of it. Let propositional truth become personal truth, and then go into the world to live it and share it.