

John 20.19-31

Raising doubts

Christ Church Selly Park

Sunday 15 May 2022

Resurrection People [5]

Doubts

Today as Bobbie says we are looking at doubt. I think.

I had to change a light switch this week, and Jess had the cheek to doubt my skills. Well, she's in for a shock later.

That's a joke by the way – I didn't change a light switch and I don't give my wife electric shocks.

Doubt can be a good thing. If you have a computer you've probably seen a message like, 'Are you sure you want to delete all these files?' Very useful if you press delete by mistake.

Once or twice I have wished my computer could be clever enough to scan emails I've written and ask 'Are you sure you really want to send this?' when it detects something unwise...

But doubt is not *always* a good thing. Doubting the skill of a doctor might stop us taking the medicine we need. *Self*-doubt is common, and can stop us doing things we are able to. My current health issues are causing me to doubt and question myself and my ability to do things every single day – it's not good.

We are wise not to believe everything we read or see in the news – but if we start to *doubt* everything we're in trouble.

When it comes to our faith – is doubt an important part of it, or something that needs to be addressed?

Let's see what this passage from John's gospel has to teach us – please open your Bibles to John chapter 20.

Sending (19-23)

We find ourselves in Jerusalem, on Easter Sunday (19) – the **first day of the week** is Sunday, not Monday – the day Jesus rose from the dead. He had already met Mary Magdalene in the garden earlier that day (14-17). She had told the disciples (18), but they didn't believe her (e.g. Luke 24.7).

We're in Jerusalem, in a locked room, the disciples are together, afraid of what the **Jewish leaders** would do to them next (19). I imagine the atmosphere was pretty tense.

Suddenly, **Jesus came and stood among them** (19). How he got through the locked door – I don't know – but he wasn't a ghost as Graham showed us last Sunday. They were able to touch him, and he ate with them (Luke 24.39-43).

John isn't concerned with that here. He wants us to know what Jesus said to them: **'Peace be with you!'** (19). He says it again in verse 21, and again in verse 26. Three times he repeats it.

I wonder what 'peace' means to you? Maybe the book 'Peace at last' comes to mind! Normally we mean the *absence* of something stressful. But in the Bible 'peace', or *shalom* isn't the absence of something, but the *presence* of 'wholeness', or 'completeness'. One writer defines it as **life at its best under the gracious hand of God.**¹ *That* is what Jesus meant by, **'Peace be with you.'**

The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord (20) – of course they were! He was back! It was like losing something precious and then finding it down the back of the sofa weeks later – only much, much greater! How I long for that day when I shall see Jesus face-to-face, and know this joy of the disciples!

Jesus was there to bring joy and peace to his friends – but also to commission them to continue his work.

‘As the Father has sent me,’ he said, **‘I am sending you’** (21).

They – and we – are to continue Jesus’ work: announcing the coming of the kingdom of God, calling people to repentance and faith, telling people of the Father’s forgiveness and love, releasing and healing people in the power of the Holy Spirit. That’s what Jesus did, and he calls us to follow him and continue his work. *(And it’s what verse 23 means – ask me about that if you’re interested!)*

And then Jesus **breathed on them** (22). It’s an unusual word that appears only here in the New Testament. But in the Greek Old Testament it is used several times at important moments:

- Genesis 2.7 – God breathed life into Adam.
- 1 Kings 17.21 – Elijah breathed life into a dead boy.
- Ezekiel 37.9 – Ezekiel prophesied to the wind – the same word as ‘Spirit’ – to breathe life into the valley of dry bones.

Do you see what John is getting at? Without the Spirit breathing life into us we are as good as dead – when Jesus breathed on them it was a sign of what was about to happen: he was going to send the Spirit to bring life, to transform these frightened and locked-away disciples into the bold apostles who changed the world.

What does all that have to do with doubt? Let’s carry on and see.

Showing (24-29)

Have you ever been told a story by someone that's too good to be true? ¶ Maybe it has a grain of truth but you just know it's been exaggerated for effect? *You* know it's not quite true, the person *telling* the story knows it's not quite true... and yet everyone smiles and nods along. Never let the truth get in the way of a good story, someone once told me.

I don't know what Thomas thought the others were up to when they told him they had seen Jesus – but he didn't believe them. For whatever reason, he **was not with the disciples** in the room that night **when Jesus came** (24). When they told him excitedly, **'We have seen the Lord!'** (25), he poured cold water on their joy:

He said to them, 'Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.'

John 20.25 (NIV)

Cue centuries of Christian art painting the rather gruesome scene of Thomas sticking his fingers into Jesus' side. Here's *Doubting Thomas* by Caravaggio ¶.

Except that's not necessarily what happened.

Too often we think we know what the Bible says without actually checking or even reading it. For example, we all know:

- there was a donkey in the stable when Jesus was born, before he was visited by three kings;
- Adam and Eve ate an apple in the Garden of Eden;
- money is the root of all evil;
- Jonah was swallowed by a whale;
- Thomas shoved his finger into Jesus' side.

We know all those things – except the problem is, none of them is in the Bible:

Neither Matthew nor Luke mention a donkey, or a stable. The 'kings' were pagan priests, and Matthew never says there were three of them, simply three gifts.

The apple in the garden of Eden is described as 'fruit' so could just as easily have been a fig, or a pomegranate.

Paul *actually* says *the love* of money is *a* root of *all kinds* of evil.

Jonah was swallowed by a fish – and whales aren't fish.

And John never actually says that Thomas put his finger into Jesus' wound, simply that he wanted to.

Some of those aren't important but they illustrate an important point: we need to make sure we listen to what the Bible actually says, rather than what we *think* it says, or what we *want* it to say.

In Ephesians Paul famously likens disciples to a Roman soldier, with a helmet, breastplate, shield, and so on. The only weapon he describes is **the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God** (Ephesians 6.17). Friends, the battle we are in is real and our *only weapon* is this *hold up your Bible*.

It teaches us who God is, and all his promises to his people. It tells what he's done, and things he will do. It contains eye-witness accounts about Jesus. It tells us who we are, and how God is calling his people to live lives of holiness, to be different, to be *in* the world, not *of* the world.

It's not that the Bible is easy or contains an answer to every question – of course not. Some questions *do* have answers, and it's important we listen even if we don't like what we hear.

But whatever question we have, the Bible leads us to God, and invites us to put our trust in him. That's what faith is. Faith is not about knowing all the answers, but trusting our Father who speaks to us and loves us and sent Jesus and his Spirit to help us.

It's common these days to say that doubt is good, that doubt is part of faith. I disagree. Having questions is good, wanting to explore faith is good, even challenging God is good – the psalms do that all the time! But Jesus said to Thomas: '**Stop doubting and believe**' (27). Doubt is not good, for at least three reasons.

1. **Doubt hurts.** Some of our doubts, some of our questions are small and don't really affect us day-to-day. Others are huge and we can't get through a day without thinking about them. Thomas was clearly hurting – he was mourning Jesus' death, and then either missed out or was the victim of a really cruel joke.

2. **Doubt cuts us off from others.** It's too easy to think – wrongly – that we are the only ones with doubts and questions, that everyone else has faith like a mighty oak tree. So we keep them to ourselves, we keep *ourselves* to ourselves, like Thomas staying away from the others that first Easter day. When we do that our doubts fester and grow into something worse: cynicism, unbelief.

3. **Doubt stops us trusting God.** Often something happens that seems to contradict what we thought we knew. Thomas thought Jesus was the Messiah but then he was killed – had Thomas left his home and family for three years to follow a liar? Or did he need a bigger, less simple view of who God is and how he works?

Doubt is a normal thing – goodness me, even *vicars* have doubts! If you think I’ve been spending the last three months in prayer and studying the Bible you could not be more wrong. I have been and am angry with God – and when I get angry with God, like the petulant child I can be, I ignore him. I doubt myself, my role, my suitability. I doubt his love, his goodness and care. I have wondered if I even want to come back, or just give up. Doubt is a normal thing.

But it’s not a good thing. Doubt is part of the journey of faith, but it can knock us off course so easily. That’s why Jesus said to Thomas: **‘Stop doubting and believe’** (27). Sometimes trusting God is easy – most of the time it is a decision, and act of will.

Let’s look at the way Jesus treated Thomas in his doubts. He began by speaking peace to all of them, including Thomas (26) – remember, in the Bible peace is not about the absence of noise but the presence of wholeness, wellbeing, and completeness.

Then Jesus spoke directly to Thomas and showed he knew exactly what had been in Thomas’s heart all that week – his questions, his doubts (27). **Jesus knew, and loved him anyway.** In the same way, Jesus knows what’s in your heart today – your questions, your doubts, your shame, your secret sins – and he loves you anyway.

He loved Thomas and he loves you as you are – but he doesn't want us to stay that way. Jesus calls all his people to change, to believe. **'Stop doubting and believe,'** Jesus said to Thomas (27). And he did: I picture Thomas falling at Jesus' feet as he says, **'My Lord and my God!'** (28). No poking – simply worship.

Doubt is normal, but it is not good. Jesus loves us even when we doubt him – he is faithful even when we are not. He holds us fast even as we barely cling on. He loves us in our doubts, but sends his Spirit to change us, to renew us, to bring new life, to help us grow in trust, to help us walk in faith.

The worst thing we can do with doubt and questions is keep them to ourselves, is shut ourselves off from God and his Word, from our Christian sisters and brothers.

So I promise you that if any one of you comes to me with questions or doubts, however small or enormous, I won't slam the door in your face. I won't give you glib or rehearsed easy answers. I will listen, I will pray, I will open the Bible with you, I will walk alongside you, and I will do my best to lead you to Jesus and the peace that is found only in him.

If you don't want to talk to me, fine – but please share your doubts and questions with a trusted Christian friend. Talk about them, pray about them, laugh and cry with one another – don't expect a quick fix or an easy answer, but walk with one another in love.

And pray for Jesus to breathe his Spirit into you to bring life, and peace, and deep knowledge of God's love for you in Jesus.

Saving (30-31)

Finally, John's famous summary shows why he wrote his gospel: **that [we] may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing [we] may have life in his name** (31).

Note what he does *not* say: that we may have the answers to all of life's questions. No: *John* wrote, so *we* might put our trust in *Jesus*.

The road is bumpy and the journey is long, fraught with danger. But God doesn't expect us to travel alone. He breathes his life into us, he gives us his Spirit to transform and renew us. He tells us all we need to know – we need to listen. He gives us each other for support. And he invites us to put our trust in him – to choose him even when we feel like he loves everyone else but us.

God's response to our doubts and questions is – sometimes – to give us an answer. But, *all* of the time, his response is 'trust me, put your faith in Jesus so you might have life.' Jesus said: **'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed'** (29).

Notes

¹ Milne, *The Message of John (BST)*, 297.