

Sermon on John 20: 19-31

God Believes in You

John's Gospel is written probably around 3 generations after Jesus' crucifixion.

And it's written for a struggling and doubting church which is grappling with persecutions, upheaval, and the mere fact that Jesus had not yet returned.

How could they maintain their faith given that they'd not seen Jesus and that the world seemed to be falling in around them?

They are asking the questions Thomas is asking.

We want to see.

Amid all the turmoil of the world we need some surety.

Some firm foundations.

Some proof that this crucified Lord to whom we cling has indeed been raised from the dead as we've been told.

And that this not a one off event.

As if it mattered back then but has no purchase on our lives today.

As if it's an interesting quirk of history and little more.

No, we want to know that he was raised once and for all.

And that nothing is now the same.

And that our perspective on everything is irrevocably different because death has truly been defeated.

And that Jesus' resurrection says something hopeful in a way we can't imagine or describe about the final destination of all flesh, ours included.

That this faith we proclaim is indeed, well, true.

Pretty standard questions as they go, and ones the faithful of many generations have asked century after century.

John's answer is to tell Thomas' story.

Unless I see, I will not believe.

Unless I see the marks, the holes, the scars, unless I see that this Jesus you say is risen is the one who was crucified, I will not believe.

A week later Thomas gets the proof he longed for.

'My God and my Lord', is his astonished and faith filled response, the only person in John's Gospel to address Jesus directly as God, fulfilling what John had written in chapter 1 at the very beginning, that the word was with God, and the word was God.

Yet Jesus does not commend him.

Rather he commends all the Christians to come who are called to have faith without seeing, without touching.

There's no sermon on the mount in John, but his own beatitude is found in Jesus' affirmation, blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.

So we can imagine John's little struggling community of Christians taking great strength from Thomas' story.

And being blessed in their sharing of communion and of the story and within their little assembly by the presence of the risen Christ, even though they could not see him in the flesh, as it were.

Faith remains a mystery and a gift.

Something we receive, not something we create.

And as such it always comes to us as a surprise as we cannot control it.

Just as we cannot control God.

These many years later I think we can all relate to the feelings of those early Christians.

And Thomas'

We all have doubts, questions.

The mystery of the resurrection remains elusive and somewhat impenetrable.

You'll notice how involved and detailed the accounts of the crucifixion are.

The lead up, the crisis moment, each of the Gospels offers great insight into the events surrounding Jesus' death.

Yet the resurrection accounts are far more diffuse, far more mysterious.

They are far more sparing.

Far harder to get our heads around.

This stands to reason in a sense, we understand death and destruction.

It's not new.

It's not different.

We can well imagine how Jesus came to be crucified.

That all accords with the world we know.

The resurrection is a different matter.

Strange appearances.

Strange bodily properties.

Our language, like our minds, strains to encapsulate what happened.

And this makes it hard to believe.

Was dead, but is risen?

No, can't be.

Not in the flesh anyway.

As a metaphor or spiritual analogy of some kind perhaps, but not actually risen from the dead.

Can we possibly allow that this could be so?

That has been the question faced by the world ever since that first Easter.

We're always reaching out, straining to the truth which will forever be something we can't grasp fully.

The Christian community has always replied, as difficult as it is, and despite our doubts, we believe it is so.

We cannot see, and yet we believe.

We believe in the resurrection of the dead.

I have close Christian friends who believe they've had visions of Jesus, or have heard the voice of God in some demonstrable way.

Friends who have had dreams they interpret as somehow being of God.

All such things are very biblical of course and I have no reason to doubt them.

But it has never happened for me.

I've had a quiet faith thus far in that regard with no such fireworks.

I've never had Martin of Tours' vision of the risen Christ or Martin Luther's sense of wrestling with the devil in his monastic cell.

I can't claim any great personal experience in such a way.

Just a lingering and nagging sense that Jesus shows us the deepest truth there is.

Then deepest love.

Sometimes I wish I had had such an experience, but then I'm not sure it wouldn't only deepen the mystery of the resurrection for me.

I have times of doubting and scepticism.

I find the resurrection compelling and elusive, astonishing and difficult at the same time.

I like George McDonald, the great Scottish divine's contention that the Christian story is so deep and wonderful and surprising in its proclamation of sacrificial love that even if were not literally true, it should be.

The irony is that it seems that for those who were there, who actually engaged with Jesus and lived through the events at the heart of the faith, it didn't exactly make it much easier to fully comprehend.

They preached a crucified and risen Lord, but even so great an apostle as Paul struggled to describe in human language what it all meant.

Yet they lived it.

The doubts and questions and struggling with what it all meant didn't stop them living their faith.

And in the end that remains the challenge for all of us who profess faith in Jesus.

We won't understand it all, parts will remain confounding.

But whatever the nature of our faith be it weak or strong, loud or soft, experienced with spiritual fireworks or more in the quiet stillness of our own hearts, the challenge of the risen Christ to the disciples remains for us – as the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.

Living with the mystery of resurrection and living a life of love in Jesus' way whatever our doubts and questions remains the mark of a faithful people.

Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed.

There's a part of Thomas in all of us, yet we do well to remember that as the tradition has it, Thomas became a missionary to India and ultimately a martyr.

And perhaps alongside the mystery of the resurrection itself, this is the other strange part of the story.

That Jesus entrusts the ministry of the resurrection into the hands of his failing and helpless disciples – there's hope for us all!

As one commentator puts it, by rights he might have stood in the locked upper room with his fearful little band of followers and said, 'Shame on you.', but instead he offers them peace.

'Peace be with you.', Jesus says, allaying their fears.

This is the kind of Messiah he is, and this is the kind of love he offers.

There's a song by the American folk singer Pierce Pettis which goes like this:

When you start to doubt that you exist
God believes in you
Confounded by the evidence
God believes in you

When your light burns so dim
When your chances seem so slim
And you swear you don't believe in him
God believes in you

When you rise up just to fall again
God believes in you
Deserted by your closest friends
God believes in you

When you're betrayed with a kiss
You turn your cheek to another fist
It dose not have to end like this
God believes in you.

Thank goodness.

Because most of the time, like the disciples, we struggle to believe that God believes in us as much as we struggle to believe in God himself.

Yet God seems to have no such concern.

Jesus calls these fragile, broken people to follow him and has this extraordinary belief that they will carry the message that he is risen to the waiting world.

Even after they've all fallen away and are here huddled together for fear of the outside world.

By taking down the story as he has, John is saying to his frightened little church at the end of the first century, don't be afraid, God believes in you, God loves you, that you might believe in him, love him.

He is saying it to us too.

Peace be with you.

Whatever your doubts, your experiences, your struggles, your fears, peace be with you.

And I am sending you out to tell the world that I am risen and bring the peace that I bring.

Blessed are they who have not seen and yet have believed.

Living by faith doesn't mean having all the answers, we never will.

It means being willing to live as if Jesus is really risen from the dead, even when we doubt.

It means believing that God believes in us even when we mess up or disbelieve.

It means loving in the face of a world which sees power and force as the ultimate virtues.

And it means going on even when things don't work out as we imagine they should – going on in the trust that God finally has everything in hand.

It means believing without seeing.

I always think Easter seems like a long time ago the week after.

We all breathe a collective sigh of relief.

Yet the task of living by faith is only just beginning all over again.

And once more the call comes to us to follow after Jesus who is risen from the dead.

Much will remain a mystery, we are even a mystery to ourselves a lot of the time, yet God's love is constant and in the end that's what sustains us in faith.

Blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed.

Now and forever. Amen.