

A few years ago we ran a Wednesday evening study course in church
It was called Build on the Rock – the sub-title was “Faith, doubt and Jesus”

In the first session we thought about times when our own faith had been strong
And times when we had struggled with doubt, or were still struggling.

At the end of the course I asked the group if they’d like to do another,
And, if so, what sort of questions should it tackle.
One person said they’d like a course that proved ‘beyond doubt’ the truth of the
Christian faith!

That same desire for certainty is written large in our Gospel reading.
When the other disciples tell Thomas, “We have seen the Lord!”
Thomas is skeptical and demands evidence:
“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 it.**”

On the basis of this verse the atheist, Richard Dawkins, has described Thomas as “the
only really admirable disciple”

We don’t know much about Thomas,
but John tells us just enough to form an impression of his character.
He comes across as **loyal** but rather **pessimistic**
As a down-to-earth **realist** who won’t succumb to peer pressure
And who’s not afraid **to ask questions.**

And that’s how we see him in our passage this morning –
insisting that only hard evidence will convince him that Jesus has risen.

When Jesus appears for the second time it’s as if he’s come especially for Thomas

But Jesus speaks no rebuke
Instead he graciously submits himself to Thomas’ need for evidence.
“Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand and place it in my side,
and do not be unbelieving but believing”

It appears that for Thomas, seeing Jesus was sufficient,
and he makes his astonishing confession of faith:
‘My Lord and my God’

This declaration is unique in the Gospels.
No other disciple expressed his faith in Jesus like this -
Calling him **Lord** and **God** - titles used only for Yahweh, for the one and only God.

This is really the climax of John’s Gospel – the Gospel which begins by declaring:
“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . .
This Word became flesh and dwelt among us”

And now, at the end of the Gospel,
Thomas, the down-to-earth realist, acknowledges Jesus as **Lord and God**.

Do we wish we could have the sort of experience that Thomas had?
One that banishes all doubt about the resurrection –
and all doubt about who Jesus is?

We may do – but we need to be careful what we wish for!
For Thomas it wasn't an armchair exercise.
It certainly wasn't just something to give him assurance of life after death.

That experience changed Thomas's life forever.
He, with the other disciples, received the Holy Spirit as Jesus breathed on them
And was given a commission:
"As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."

That sending took Thomas as far as India
where he is thought to have been martyred in 72 AD

But Thomas' wonderful statement of faith draws an enigmatic response from Jesus.
"Because you have seen me, you have believed.
Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed"

"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed"

Richard Dawkins has pounced on these words,
saying that they **prove** that Christian faith is **irrational**,
And that Christianity makes a **virtue** of **belief without evidence**.

But this is to misread the Gospel completely.

In fact the importance of **evidence**, particularly **eye-witness** evidence, is a major theme
of the closing chapters of John's Gospel
Far from playing down the value of evidence John presents it as **the route to faith**.

When Peter and John find Jesus' tomb empty on Easter Day
with the burial cloths discarded and face napkin neatly folded.
John, writing about himself, says "Then the other disciple who reached the tomb first,
also went in, and he **saw** and **believed**"
His **believing** was based on the **evidence** that he saw.

When Jesus appears to the disciples in the upper room evidence is again central.
Jesus "**showed** them his hands and his side".
He wanted their minds to be convinced.

With Thomas, of course, seeing the evidence was vital.
And Jesus had no problem with that.
He wanted Thomas journey from unbelieving to believing to be based on the facts.

So rather than advocating blind faith the Gospel places great importance on evidence

Nowhere is this clearer than in the final verses of our reading - probably the original ending of John's Gospel -

"Jesus did many other miraculous signs **in the presence of his disciples**, which are not recorded in this book. But **these are written that you may believe** that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God".

So when Jesus says "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" he can't be advocating irrational or blind faith.

What then does he mean?

And why does John include this statement at this climax of his Gospel?

The earliest Gospel, Mark, was circulating during the lifetime of the eyewitnesses, many of them are named in Mark's account.

And for years afterwards, these witnesses could have been cross examined.

But John was written during the last decade of the first century AD.

By that time many of the eyewitnesses would have died.

Most of John's readers were born after the time of the resurrection.

So they, and we of course, have to follow a different way to faith from the way of Thomas.

Thomas believed because he saw the risen Jesus.

We are not bowled over by an appearance before our eyes – as Thomas was.

We can't fall back on a vivid memory

So what foundations can there be for our faith?

Let me tell you, very briefly, some of the foundation stones that are important for me.

There's no time to go into details

But when this talk is posted on the church web site I'll include some references in case you want to dig deeper.

The first foundation, for me, is the Gospel accounts themselves.

I've not long finished re-reading John's gospel and I'm now reading Mark again.

And as I read them, they have, for me, **the ring of truth**.

When John tells us that he saw these things and has recorded them accurately, the text itself persuades me that I can trust his account.

There is nothing florid or over dramatic about it

For something so momentous it's very matter of fact.

Read again John's account of the resurrection appearances and see if you agree with me that it has 'the ring of truth'.

My second foundation is the birth of the Christian church.

When I read a passage like the one this morning from the book of Acts¹,

¹ Acts 4:32-35

I can't think of anything, other than Jesus' resurrection, that could have transformed Jesus' fearful disciples into a vibrant, confident, caring and attractive community. What else could have done it?

And then there's the lack of alternative convincing explanations for the empty tomb. All sorts of theories have been put forward to explain it But when examined carefully they don't stand up.

People who have set out to disprove the resurrection have been forced to the conclusion that the only plausible explanation is that it really did happen².

My fourth foundation comes from a recent book that has upended centuries of skepticism about the reliability of the gospel accounts It's called *Jesus and the eyewitnesses*³ It shows, from evidence within the gospels themselves, that what has come down to us is based on eyewitness accounts. And that the Gospels could only have been written by people with an intimate knowledge of the Palestine that Jesus lived in. So I have confidence that the gospel accounts are not works of fiction.

The final foundation I'll refer to is *The Resurrection Argument That Changed a Generation of Scholars*

That's the title of a lecture that you can watch on Youtube⁴

It's often suggested that the stories of Jesus evolved over decades of oral transmission with embellishments creeping in at each re-telling and the story of an simple Jewish travelling preacher ended up as a story of resurrection

But this lecture demolishes that idea.

It shows documentary evidence that settled belief in the resurrection can be traced right back to the time of the crucifixion.

That it was the fact which started the church, not a myth spun by the church.

These foundations work for me

But whether we come to faith like this, or in some other quite different way, the result should be the same as it was for Thomas and the other disciples

It's not the satisfaction of a completed jigsaw

It's an obedient response to the commission of Jesus

"As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."

To live for me in the world in the power of my Holy Spirit.

Amen

1513 words

² For example, *Who Moved the Stone?* by Frank Morison

³ Until recently sceptics have asserted that the gospel accounts were written many years after the events described, and by people writing far away from Palestine

⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ay_Db4RwZ_M