

Sermon for Knox Church, Dunedin, Sunday 3 April 2016

given by the Rev Peter Wishart

FROM DOUBT TO FAITH

TEXT. John Chapter 20 verse 29 New RSV

Christ's final beatitude in John's gospel.

Jesus said to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me?"

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

John's Gospel says that Thomas was not with the ten other disciples when the risen Christ appeared in their midst on the evening of the first Easter Day.

They were changed by their experience of the risen Christ. Their grief was gone. They were filled with joy. When Thomas joined them again a week later they were bursting with good news. "We have seen the Lord!" they said to Thomas.

Thomas did not believe them. He reacted with skepticism. A Kiwi version of his reaction would be, "Ok, you've seen Jesus! Yeah Right!!"

I identify with Thomas here. I also have my questions about the resurrection of Jesus.

Exactly what did the disciples experience in the evening of that first Easter Day? I want evidence that would stack up in the modern world. I want precision. I want to know for sure. Exactly what are we claiming to be true when we say, "Christ is risen?"

I am glad that Thomas features so prominently in the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter of John's gospel. He shows that it is legitimate to have doubts, and not get taken for a ride by other people's religious experiences.

Those of us who have survived the resurrection controversies of the mid 1960s may feel complicated about the resurrection. Of course there are several theories

about it. Each theory has some helpful insights. But all the theories have their limitations.

I want to say to you that there must have been good evidence to change the disciples from being filled with grief and despair, to being filled with faith and joy. The disciples were not simple minded fools, swept away by idle tales. Several of the resurrection narratives in the gospels make that point. At first the apostles did not believe the women who were the earliest witnesses of the resurrection.

The apostles were not expecting to see Jesus again. And their doubts must have been overcome by strong and convincing evidence.

Exactly what they experienced is not available to us by historical research, for as Professor Lloyd Geering rightly insists, the notion of resurrection is a theological one. In proclaiming that Jesus had been raised from the dead, the apostles were going far beyond mere physical categories of description. Resurrection involves the notions of glorification, vindication, and acceptance and affirmation by God.

However, I want to argue that what the apostles experienced at the first Easter can be felt by us through sharing their faith. By being in the church which resulted from the resurrection, we can sense the joy, and the renewed hope, the sense of purpose and mission that the apostles experienced.

Resurrection is about the victory of God's love over hatred, and the triumph of God's goodness over evil, and the defeat of death by God's eternal life.

When Thomas rejoined the other apostles after Easter Day, they said to him, "We have seen the Lord."

Thomas reacted with skepticism.

He said, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." A logical empiricist could not have put it better. The philosophical precision of Thomas's tests have always impressed me.

That, however, was not the end of the matter.

On the Sunday following Easter Day the disciples were again together behind locked doors. This time Thomas was with them.

The risen Jesus appeared again in their midst, and greeted them with the words, "Peace be with you." This time Jesus had come especially to see Thomas and to deal with his unbelief. I want to emphasise that it was the risen Jesus himself who dealt with Thomas's unbelief.

Jesus said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, but believe. "

John's Gospel does not tell us whether or not Thomas carried out his precise verification procedures. Suddenly they became irrelevant. In the presence of his risen Lord, Thomas was overwhelmed with an experience of divine revelation which lifted him far above his skepticism. He uttered a confession of faith in Jesus which some New Testament scholars have hailed as the very crown of John's gospel.

Thomas said to Jesus, "My Lord and my God." The greatest sceptic made the greatest confession of faith in Jesus.

Jesus then went on to link us with the Easter faith.

Jesus said to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

We were not there on the first Easter Day. We did not experience the appearances of the risen Christ to his earliest disciples. But we are not disadvantaged by that. By faith we are aware of the risen Christ with us through scripture, through the sacraments, through our fellowship in the church, through ministering to the needs of people for friendship and love. In these and in many other ways, we experience the presence of the risen Christ in our midst. Ours is an Easter faith. We are an Easter people. We are the body of Christ. He is alive in us. Christ is the dance, and the dance goes on.

C.K. Barrett has said of our text,

"Future generations of Christians who do not see the risen Christ as Thomas did, will believe on the basis of the apostolic testimony alone. They are not for this reason to be pitied. They are blessed. Their faith is not of the kind that rests upon signs and wonders, but clings to the word of Christ alone."

And Barrett quotes 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 1:8 “Without having seen him you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy.”

I close with a brief quotation from page 9 of Helmut Rex’s book, “Did Jesus Rise From the Dead?”

Quote “Did Jesus rise from the dead? “Our question in its form is an historical question. As such it is directed towards the very centre of the Christian faith, because the essence of the Christian faith is not a set of moral and religious truths, but an event, and that event is the resurrection of Jesus.”

In the name of God, Creator, Saviour and Spirit, to whom be all glory and praise, now and always. Amen.

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