

Believing Thomas

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church on April 27th, 2025 – John 20:19-31)

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In the film 'Conclave', Cardinal Lawrence is the one whose task it is to run the conclave. The conclave is the election process that meets in secret to select a new pope. He is a complex character who is personally struggling with his own faith. There is much wheeling and dealing going on as they gather to select the new pope.

At one point Cardinal Lawrence makes a comment about certainty. He says "There is one sin which I have come to fear above all others. Certainty. Certainty is the great enemy of unity. Certainty is the deadly enemy of tolerance. Even Christ was not certain at the end. My God My God Why have you forsaken me he cried out at the 9th hour on the cross. Our faith is a living thing precisely because it walks hand in hand. If there was only certainty and no doubt, there would be no mystery and therefore no need for faith."

In his view, being really certain, can stop both unity and understanding. He is saying that true faith needs both doubt and mystery. Certainty can prevent people from finding common ground and make it hard to be open to different perspectives and viewpoints and as such lead to intolerance.

Perhaps he is saying that true faith changes and evolves, and that entertaining doubt, actually strengthens faith. Faith needs space to wonder and explore.

It is as though Cardinal Lawrence knows the story of Thomas well.

Thomas has been given bad press for centuries. Called the 'doubter', the 'cynic', the 'sceptic', the 'unbeliever' and worse. I want to suggest this morning that none of that, is really very fair.

Let's look again at the resurrection appearance story we have before us today.

The disciples have gathered together, after the events of Easter Day, scared and hiding from the authorities, scared no doubt of what might happen to them next. They have locked themselves away from the world.

It is into this space that Jesus breaks through their fear and joins them, offering both a word of peace and also a commission – to go out into the world and forgive.

For some reason Thomas is not present at that time. We don't really know why. Perhaps he was just as frightened, but hiding elsewhere. Perhaps he just needed to be alone to reflect and grieve. Perhaps he had simply gone back to his previous life thinking it was all over, that his following of Jesus had come to naught.

It appears though, that the other disciples manage to locate him and tell him of their experience. Thomas had some questions and some doubts about their story. He simply asks for proof, the proof the others had seen, they had seen the scars on Jesus hands and feet, that is all he wanted as well. Consumed with grief, unsure of what lay ahead, standing at a crossroad, he just wanted a sign of some kind. As sign to tell him that this hadn't been in vain, that the following of Jesus meant something.

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We have met Thomas a few times in John's gospel, and he is usually asking questions, questions perhaps that the others are not prepared to voice out loud.

We first meet Thomas, who is one of the twelve, when Jesus is talking about his own death, just as they all had learnt of the death of Lazarus. So here a confident Thomas says, that as followers of Jesus they should follow Jesus and if that means dying with him so be it. (John 11:16)

We meet him again as Jesus is talking to the disciples about his impending departure, that he is going away, that where he is going, he will prepare a place for them, and return for them. Jesus tells his disciples that they know the way to the place he is going.

Not so confidently now, Thomas speaks up and asks a question:

"Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" (John 14:5)

And how does Jesus respond to Thomas' question? He offers one of the most significant answers in the bible as he says "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him." (John 14:5-7). Jesus is the way.

On this occasion we find Thomas now gathered with the disciples, but still unsure and looking for some kind of sign. And a sign he gets. Again, Jesus speaks words of peace to those gathered. Jesus challenges Thomas to touch him in order that he might have the proof he needs. We aren't told that Thomas even needs to touch him, but we are told that Thomas makes his 'Christological confession', he calls Jesus - my Lord and my God.

I wonder what Thomas was expecting that day? Was he expecting to even see Jesus? If he did, was he expecting Jesus to tell him off, or to rebuke him, or to have an argument with him? What does he get instead – a word of peace, an offer to see for himself the proof he needs. A gentle word to stop doubting and simply believe.

It is here that Thomas makes his declaration of faith – My Lord and My God, but is he remembered for that? No, we remember him only as the doubter. Why do we ignore his declaration of faith, we don't do that to Martha or Peter, despite their doubts and in Peter's case denial?

To declare Jesus as your Lord and God, in the environment of Jesus' day, was a dangerous thing to do. You see the only one you called my Lord and God was the emperor, the one representing the occupying force. No doubt such a declaration could get you into trouble or even killed. So far from being a coward, Thomas shows enormous courage.

For Thomas it is now clear to him that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, he is Lord and God. Thomas takes this seriously and acts on it. He is no longer indifferent, or apathetic or hiding away, he is changed and goes on to spread the gospel throughout India, where he is martyred.

Thomas is more like us than we think. Doubt is a normal human response to things. He like us is a searcher, a questioner, one who is trying to make sense of how his life is

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changed by Jesus. His questioning and searching have led him to really owning his faith. His trying to understand leads him to trusting and following.

May we all be more like Thomas, not afraid to ask questions, to search, and when we have found our answers, to follow the way of Jesus, speaking words of peace throughout the world, offering forgiveness to all, as we share the good news of Jesus with them.

It is okay to be unsure. Thomas shows us that a healthy dose of doubt leads to a significant commitment to follow Jesus. Thomas certainty, expressed in his confession of faith, was not possible without his doubts and questions.

Let's rename Thomas as believing Thomas.