**23rd April 2017**

**John 20.19-31**

This week has seen Teresa May the Prime Minister call a general election she said she wouldn't call.

Much will be written about her motivations for the U-turn, the change of heart that led her to this point. The long-term view of her motivation will in time be coloured by the eventual result of course. Whether it was a wise decision or not will be judged on what happens on June 8th.

For months there has been a pretty straightforward balance sheet of advantages and disadvantages to holding an early poll. Theresa May believed it tipped to holding firm.

Until only a few days ago it was those arguments that held sway.

Theresa May has shown time and again that she is willing to change her mind when the facts change.

For example, she and her chancellor dropped a major plank of his Budget in only a week when they saw resistance, and the government junked a review of the powers of the House of Lords.

Some commentators suggest that her argument for calling an election is because the end of the likely tortuous Article 50 negotiations is a hard deadline set for March 2019. Under the Fixed Term Parliaments Act, that's when parties would be starting to prepare for a general election the following year, and so the government would be exposed to hardball from the EU because ministers would be desperate to avoid accepting anything that would be politically unpopular, or hold the Brexit process up, at the start of a crucial election cycle.

So the lady was for turning, even if he reasons Theresa May hung back from an early election haven't disappeared.

There are bound to be a number of doubts about her wisdom in the coming weeks.

This morning we look at the king of doubt, Thomas, and how he turned his thoughts around to accept the resurrection and proclaim Jesus as his Lord.

I would love to have met the Risen Jesus. I would have loved to have been in that room when he appeared to all his disciples and to Thomas. Because there is a bit of the Thomas in me, and if you’re honest I bet there is a bit of Thomas in you. Wouldn’t you like to see and touch and find assurance? Wouldn’t you really like to know for certain that the Lord is risen?

But there is a risk in going back to that room. What if Jesus hadn’t appeared? What if he hadn’t been raised from the dead – as Paul says in 1 Corinthians if Christ had not been raised our faith is futile. Do you really want to go back and see and risk being disappointed? And even if you did see would it help your belief – or would you still have nagging doubts – was that really Jesus? Was it all a bit of a stunt, or an hallucination? I guess even when you see something it still depends on how you see it. One day we will know!

Rachel Held Evans wrote a blog about the agony of doubt when attending an Easter Sunday service: [[1]](#endnote-1)

It will bother you off and on, like a rock in your shoe,

Or it will startle you, like the first crash of thunder in a summer storm,

Or it will lodge itself beneath your skin like a splinter,

Or it will show up again—the uninvited guest whose heavy footsteps you’d recognize anywhere, appearing at your front door with a suitcase in hand at the worst. possible. time.

Or it will pull you farther out to sea like rip tide,

Or hold your head under as you drown—

Triggered by an image, a question, something the pastor said, something that doesn’t add up, the unlikelihood of it all, the too-good-to-be-trueness of it, the way the lady in the thick perfume behind you sings “Up from the grave he arose!” with more confidence in the single line of a song than you’ve managed to muster in the past two years.

And you’ll be sitting there in the dress you pulled out from the back of your closet, swallowing down the bread and wine, not believing a word of it.

Not. A. Word.

So you’ll fumble through those back pocket prayers—“help me in my unbelief!”—while everyone around you moves on to verse two, verse three, verse four without you.

You will feel their eyes on you, and you will recognize the concern behind their cheery greetings: “We haven’t seen you here in a while! So good to have you back.”

And you will know they are thinking exactly what you used to think about Easter Sunday Christians:

Nominal.

Lukewarm.

Indifferent.

But you won’t know how to explain that there is nothing nominal or lukewarm or indifferent about standing in this hurricane of questions every day and staring each one down until you’ve mustered all the bravery and fortitude and trust it takes to whisper just one of them out loud on the car ride home:

“What if we made this up because we’re afraid of death?”

And you won’t know how to explain why, in that moment when the whisper rose out of your mouth like Jesus from the grave, you felt more alive and awake and resurrected than you have in ages because at least it was out, at least it was said, at least it wasn’t buried in your chest anymore, clawing for freedom.

And, if you’re lucky, someone in the car will recognize the bravery of the act. If you’re lucky, there will be a moment of holy silence before someone wonders out loud if such a question might put a damper on Easter lunch.

But if you’re not—if the question gets answered too quickly or if the silence goes on too long—please know you are not alone.

There are other people signing words to hymns they’re not sure they believe today, other people digging out dresses from the backs of their closets today, other people ruining Easter lunch today, other people just showing up today.

And sometimes, just showing up -  burial spices in hand -  is all it takes to witness a miracle.

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Belief in the resurrection is hard – because everyone knows, whether you’re a scientist or not – that the dead don’t rise to life. But the Christian claim was always that God did something new with Jesus that has not been repeated since. That offends reason. The early followers of Jesus couldn’t believe it – hence these stories in the gospels of incredulity and doubt. Yet history and legend suggest that most of the disciples ended up dying for their belief that Jesus had risen from the dead.

It’s interesting that the legends surrounding Thomas suggest that he went off to India to preach the gospel. The Thomist Church in South India, mainly among the Dalit caste, traces its origins to him. The dalits are known as the untouchables because they do all the dirty jobs in Indian society – in particular handling dead bodies which seems very poignant if Thomas, the one who demanded to touch the risen body of Jesus, is their founder.

People will die for their beliefs if they sincerely believe they are true, but people won’t die for their beliefs if they know their beliefs are false. The apostles were willing to die for something they had seen with their own eyes and touched with their own hands. While most people can only have faith that their beliefs are true, the disciples were in a position to know whether Jesus had risen from the dead.

The arguments about whether the resurrection happened or not: none of those arguments can prove it. None provide a knock down dead cert convincing case. That’s why I don’t go round berating people if they can’t believe in the resurrection, or they have honest doubts about Christian beliefs. It was hard for the first Christians to believe this stuff and they were there: they could see and touch and feel.

Most things in life we don’t need absolute proof and certainty before we act in faith. I sense Jesus is alive when I pray, when I read the Bible, in worship and in meeting with others. I believe I have been in the presence of Christ when I’ve seen a person die of a terminal illness but whose had confident faith; when I’ve been with someone whose life has been turned around from despair and contemplating suicide to finding faith and a reason to live; to knowing someone who’s been struggling with guilt and is beginning to know the forgiveness of God and the ability to forgive herself. In all these ways I believe I can see Jesus is alive and at work. But I can’t prove it – it always needs faith.

We have always associated Thomas with doubt. ‘You’re a right doubting Thomas’ we may accuse a pessimistic or sceptical person. Unfortunately history has remembered him for this scene where the resurrected Christ made an appearance to the disciples in a home in Jerusalem. Thomas was not present and when he heard about the event he refused to believe it. Maybe he was the forerunner of modern day cynicism. Maybe the news simply sounded too good to be true. Thomas said: Unless I feel the nail prints in his hands I will not believe.

Now if you notice Thomas had separated himself from the disciples and therefore, in his solitude, missed the resurrection appearance. Maybe the writer of the gospel is suggesting to us that Christ appears most often within the community of believers that we call the church, and when we separate ourselves from the church we take a chance on missing his unique presence.  
  
But the story doesn't end there. The second time Jesus made his appearance Thomas was present with the disciples and this time he too witnessed the event. This time he believed. What can we learn from the life of Thomas?  
  
Jesus did not blame him. I have heard a lot of Thomas-bashing in sermons but notice it does not occur in this passage. No one criticizes or rebukes Thomas for his lack of faith or for his scepticism. The passage does not tell us about how they put Thomas in his place; rather it tells us how Thomas was surprised!  
  
Thomas says he won't believe until he can see for himself that Jesus is alive. What happens next? Do they hear Jesus' voice booming through the room, rebuking Thomas and imposing some penalty on him? No! Jesus immediately appears and meets his demands! Jesus did not criticize Thomas for wanting physical evidence, but rather blessed those who believe without it.  
  
So if Jesus didn't penalize Thomas for doubting the resurrection, I don’t believe he would penalize you if you have misgivings about it.

In many ways thank God for the Thomas’s of this world. They test ideas, they detect phonies and frauds a mile off, they hold people to account and the powerful need to be held to account; they refuse to march in step to the beat of the loudest drummer. He absolutely refused to say that he understood what he did not understand, or that he believed what he did not believe. There is an uncompromising honesty about him. He would never still his doubts by pretending that they didn’t exist. There is more ultimate faith in a person who insists on working through things until they are sure, or at least have enough to go on – than the person who glibly repeats things which they have never thought through, and which they may not really believe.

Of course the Thomas’s of this world all have their downsides – but who hasn’t. One of their problems may be their fear of change and moving forward. You can get paralyzed by not being certain of all the facts –not totally sure of what the future holds that you are afraid to step out. There is no risk free universe, a universe in which the future is completely predictable. Since this is impossible the extreme doubter can be immobilised and stay put and hide in their bunker. They are the kind of people who won’t let their children go into the water until they learn to swim.

Maybe this was what was behind Jesus gentle rebuke: ‘Thomas you’ve seen me – I’ve answered your questions – now stop doubting and believe’. In other words you’ve got enough to go on – now move on.

And Thomas did. He doubted in order to be sure and he exclaimed this great profession of faith – my Lord and my God’.

Frederick Buechner, an American theologian writes that ‘whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don't have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.’

Doubt is important for change. You may have fixed views, certain certainties: this is right this is wrong. When doubts creep in it can initially be very undermining. Yet with hindsight it can also be liberating and freeing as it opens up new possibilities and visions.

Take the concept of Resurrection for those first disciples for example. They thought you were either dead or alive. Resurrection challenged the old certainties. Made you think outside the box. It changed your world view, your values, your mindset. In the process it shook the foundations of everything you believed in. For a while it would have been a fearful thing then it may also have liberated joy and the possibility for new hope.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase."

There is a story about a pre-civil rights African American community in Florida. The story says that during times of political elections, this community would rent a voting machine and go through the voting process. Now, they knew that their votes would not be counted, but they voted anyway. When asked by members of the white community why they did this every year, they replied, "Oh, just practicing. Just practicing."  
  
Believing in what is not yet seen means we practice or behave as if it is already exists. This is what leaders and visionaries do. They believe in something bigger than themselves and they begin to act as if it is so. Martin Luther King, like other great Christian leaders such as Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela – had a strong faith in the resurrection – the hope of transformation – that God’s justice and peace would come – one day. We await to see what vision our political leaders will offer to us in the coming weeks. Hopefully the doubters will test those visions and hold them to account

Doubt can be really useful. May it lead you to faith. Thomas saw the glory of the Risen Lord. Blessed are we who haven’t seen but still believe and hope.

1. <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/holy-week-for-doubters> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)