

Easter Sunday - No Doubts? John 20:19-31

Survey done 25 years ago among American Baptists:

- 22% are not absolutely certain God exists.*
- 31% are not convinced of the Virgin Birth.*
- 38% are not convinced Jesus walked on water.*
- 43% have some doubts Jesus will return to Earth.*
- 33% have doubts that the Devil exists.*

I don't think that a survey today will give us a different result – in fact they would be worse! Doubt is a common human problem. Most of our doubts are trivial. How many of you have gone out and once you have got into town wonder whether you have switched the iron off, or locked the front door? If we can be wracked with doubt about that, how more so will we worry about whether the Saviour we have trusted in is as real as He promises. Or too often we see or hear other things that Christians tell us. Or we hear something about being a Christian that isn't in our experience and we are just dubious.

And we poor old “Doubting Thomas” don't we. Here's the resurrection – the most momentous thing in human history and he doubts that it is true even though he's told so by his closest friends!

We so often focus on Thomas' doubts that we miss why he was so doubtful. I don't think it was a case of him being especially doubtful. As we read the resurrection story over all the Gospels, we see that it was a genuine shock to all the disciples. It was so unexpected, whether it was Mary in the garden or Cleopas who so did not expect the resurrection that he talked to Jesus for ages before registering. So let's not be harsh on Thomas.

Why was Thomas a doubter? Because he wasn't there on the first appearance of Jesus. This is a point often missed in sermons on Thomas. Because he wasn't there, he couldn't cope with the lack of first-hand knowledge. We don't know why he wasn't there. Maybe he was visiting his twin – Didymus means twin. It doesn't matter whether it was a good or bad reason – he just wasn't there.

How many times have you found that you have missed out on something important because you weren't where you were supposed to have been? Thomas missed something important because he wasn't there.

I guess you are the wrong congregation to speak about “being there”. I remember a time at my previous church when I was asked to take the youth service. It was an awful evening, the music was going all wrong and just as I was wondering what we should do, the guy leading worship said “I think we should just pray”. And they did. And the Holy Spirit just descended on the place. Young people that had never opened their mouth in prayer spoke. People who had never ministered to one another did so. It was amazing and quite out of character with these people. And it went on for some time. There was a leader's prayer meeting upstairs. They were quietly meditating when I burst in. I said “the Lord is moving with our youth, come and see because it's quite amazing.” And what did they do – told me not to disturb their prayer meeting! Anyway, the one downstairs was more exciting so I went back to that.

They missed out on something exciting and special in the lives of these people. In fact, they didn't believe me. Well, not until the same young people came into an “adult” prayer meeting the next night and did the same thing – and really lit the place up! I enjoyed saying “I told you so!”

God has given us one another and an opportunity to meet together to worship or to pray. Yes, we can know His presence as individuals but He has also given us one another so that we can grow together and the diversity of gifting means that we grow in a particular way together. If we don't we miss something. The writer to the Hebrews says: *Heb 10:24-25 And let us continue to consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another even more as you see the day coming nearer.*

Thomas wasn't there and missed something important. I must say that I am never overly critical when people make their excuses not to come to church. When I was teaching, I found Sundays very stressful as I prepared for the next day. It was easy to keep my churchgoing to a minimum. But

think before you miss a Sunday, or you think going to a prayer meeting isn't important. What are you missing.

You know what I mean. You meet someone in the street the next day and you hear them enthusing about what was said, or about a prophetic word, or the presence of God or maybe even someone got healed. And you think to yourself – surely that didn't happen – not in Swaffham Baptist Church! Now you know how Thomas felt. So what can we say of doubt – because we have been given this passage for a reason.

★ Doubt is natural The truth is, doubt is part of life. It is what makes us question. On a trivial level it allows us to make sure that we haven't forgotten our keys or make sure we have locked up. On a deeper level, it makes us ask questions of what we believe and there's nothing wrong with that. We have a God who is vast and if we are to explore the vastness of God we must escape the narrowness of mind that we can so easily fall into. It's comfortable to stick with what we know.

Most of us come from different backgrounds which we may have been in for a long time. It isn't comfortable to hear other Christians with other perspectives. We thought we had it all wrapped up then we meet someone with a different experience of God. Many Christians are afraid to place themselves into doubt and to question their values. They stick on their high horses and find scriptures to justify their long-held beliefs however difficult that may be. Why? Because they think that doubt is a bad thing.

However we have been given one another so we can examine our faith afresh in the light of one another's experience of God – so that we can learn and grow as we perceive what God is saying and doing. It's a hard lesson to learn and doesn't come easily.

★ Doubt can be dangerous. The thing about Thomas was that as he heard the excited disciples, he hardened his attitude. For him, believing wasn't just a case of saying "let's wait until Jesus comes then" but this statement *"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."* That's a bit strong Thomas. But Thomas was in a corner. Some of the worst problems I have found with conflict in church or outside for that matter is when people are so dogmatic that they are not prepared to listen. They are not prepared to open their minds to possibilities. And it can be ridiculous! "The Authorised Version is the only divinely inspired version of the word of God in English". We must only pray with "Thees and Thous". Certain denominations are so damned that no Christians can exist in them. Doubt is good provided we face up to the issues, search the Scriptures with a mind opened to the mind and will of God.

★ Jesus always meets an honest seeker Jesus didn't arrive and condemn Thomas to outer darkness for his doubt. He didn't mock, or tut-tut. He just said *"Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."* Thomas didn't need to and he found acceptance. God wants to change our vista of Him. You hear lots of different things taught here. I know you hear a lot of different things from the pulpit here from what you may be used to. But God meets an honest seeker and we are all on a learning curve before we get to glory so let's open our hearts and minds to Him and we will exclaim "our Lord and our God". I was talking to my mentor the other week and he was saying that he was having problems with one of his members who would not take seriously what he was being taught in their church. He boasted that he had been under the ministry of Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones at Westminster Chapel. His patience ended one day when he received the usual comment about being under the great Doctor's ministry and he replied "pity you didn't learn much then".

Hearing something different? Whether it is from me, or someone else, from a book or from other sources I would encourage you to search the scriptures, pray, discuss it with others and most importantly seek the Lord. It's not wrong to doubt, but it is wrong to dismiss things out of hand because you are afraid of it. God wants to open new vistas for you. Listen to His voice.

Let me finish with the verses at the end of the chapter: *Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." 30 Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. 31 But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing*

you may have life in his name.

We haven't seen, yet by faith we believe. Let's face our doubts and through them find that we will grow in our faith as God reveals more of Himself to us. Let's be honest and seek Him and not barricade ourselves in corners.

*Preached at Swaffham Baptist Church
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