

John 20:24-29 (Festival of St Thomas): St John's, Keswick, 3 July 2016

Belief in the resurrection of Jesus is at the heart of the Christian faith. Of course, some of us may struggle with this belief, or may not know exactly what we think about it. And it's very important for people to be able to ask questions about the faith. But for now I shall assume that we are a community of people who believe in the resurrection of Jesus. And I want us to think about how we come to hold this faith, because that question is raised by today's Gospel, on this festival of St Thomas.

If all of us present here were asked the question "How did you come to believe in the resurrection of Jesus?", our answers would reflect a range of stories, depending on whether we grew up in a believing home and never really doubted, or perhaps came to believe later, through a time of questioning and crisis. But, however varied, our stories would all reflect the basic fact that we believe in the resurrection of Jesus because at some point we were told about it by a Christian, whether our mother, friend, Sunday school teacher, priest, or the author of something we read. We were not born believing in the resurrection of Jesus. God brings us to faith in the resurrection of Jesus, and also sustains us in this faith, through the testimony of Christians – and, more widely, through the whole life of the Church, the Body of Christ.

This, I believe, is the take-home message of the story about Thomas and the risen Jesus that we have just heard. Immediately before today's Gospel we read about the first appearances of the risen Jesus. He appears first to Mary Magdalene in the garden; then to the fearful disciples, hiding behind locked doors. But Thomas wasn't with the others when Jesus appeared to them. He refuses to believe their testimony and insists on direct, independent, first-hand experience of the risen Jesus before he will believe. And Thomas is indeed granted that experience: the crucified, still wounded, but now risen Jesus appears to him too. Thomas sees him, believes, and responds with the wonderful confession: 'My Lord and my God'.

That would have been a powerful way to end this story, but it goes on to a very important punchline, a punchline that includes us. Addressing both Thomas and all future generations of believers, Jesus says: 'Have you (Thomas) believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe.'

This is a time of transition; things are going to be different because the Jesus who has been with his disciples physically all this while, and is again with them physically after rising from the dead, will soon no longer be present to them in this way. He is about to ascend to the Father, and now, just as the Father sent Jesus, so Jesus will send the disciples out into the world. Through the Spirit, Jesus will still be with them, but not in the same way.

Corresponding to this transition to a new phase of Jesus' presence and working in the world, there are *two different ways that faith arises*: faith based on *sight*, and faith based on *testimony*. The disciples, including Thomas, believed because of *sight*: they saw the risen Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus happened: in time and in place, in this world. Whatever the resurrection might come to mean, it starts as a physical reality. God is not mocking us with metaphor: the disciples *saw* the risen Jesus.

But although believing on the basis of sight may be how God starts the Church, this movement called into being by the resurrection of Jesus, that's not going to be how it continues, that's not going to be how you and I experience Jesus. The disciples do see him,

but we don't. The distinction is simple, but crucial; and if we don't grasp it and accept it and see the wisdom of God in it, there will be an ongoing sense of lack, disappointment, and confusion in our Christian lives. We will feel that the disciples we read about had the reality of something that we don't have. Our faith will seem unreal, inauthentic, second-hand.

So then, why are we called to believe in the resurrection of Jesus on the basis not of sight, but of testimony, the testimony of the first disciples, passed on down the generations, to us? It was difficult for Thomas. He first heard about the resurrection of Jesus through the testimony of the other disciples, and he didn't believe. So also for us: it's difficult. So why? Why does God do it this way? If it's not easy or natural for us to believe without seeing, why does God ask this of us when presumably we could see the risen Jesus? I don't think it helps much to say: "Well, that's just what faith is." The crucified and risen Jesus was truly seen at the beginning of the story, and he will be truly seen at the end of the story, when we shall see him face to face. But for now there is this policy of hiddenness, and in this puzzling extended interim period we have to believe without seeing, believing the testimony of the apostles, as it has come down to us through the Church. Why? That's not how I would have done it...

Well, trying to go deeper into this question, for a moment let's leave the matter of the resurrection and think more generally about how God communicates with us. I've been much helped here by some thoughts of the great early Christian teacher, St Augustine. In one of his books, Augustine discusses how to interpret the Bible, but first he addresses the objection of those who believe they have received a *direct* divine gift enabling them to understand the scriptures independently, without further human assistance: so they don't need anyone else's help, thank you very much. In response, Augustine points to a crucial pattern in scripture that weaves together two things: firstly, unmistakable, direct divine communication; secondly, divine communication via human beings. Augustine mentions two examples of this interweaving, both from the Acts of the Apostles. Remember how God dealt directly with Paul on the Damascus Road, zapping him powerfully with a blinding vision of Jesus; but then God also dealt with him in a mediated, indirect way through a human being, Ananias, who went to Paul and prayed for his sight to be restored. Or again, God first sent an angel to Cornelius (unmistakably divine communication), and then spoke to him further through Peter, a human being. Why does God do this? Why doesn't God stick to unmistakably divine communication, but insist on using human beings to get his word across?

Great question. Augustine sees the divine strategy as partly addressing the problem of human pride; we must beware of the pride that seeks independent, exalted experience of God that would set us apart and mean we would not need to learn from other people. But he goes on to say that if God always spoke through angels "then no respect would have been shown to our human status", and God does want to respect our humanity by involving us in his work in this world. More profoundly still, Augustine goes on, "if God ... only thundered out his revelation from the sky ... then *love itself* ... would have no scope for pouring minds and hearts in together ... and blending them with one another, if human beings were never to learn anything from each other". If divine revelation came to each of us directly and unmistakably, we would not need each other to know God, and love would have no role to play in blending us together.

Augustine is discussing how we come to understand the Bible, not how we come to believe in the resurrection of Jesus, but the matters are closely related and the principle is the same. God raised Jesus from the dead, and the disciples saw him; but then, rather than compelling all to believe by parading triumphantly through the streets of Jerusalem, the risen Jesus entrusts

himself to fallible human testimony, the testimony of those flakey human beings, the first disciples. Because of what God wants to bring about in us and through us, God opts for the way of testimony and trust, of people learning from each other and needing each other. Of course, this plan has been hampered by the fact that the Church has hardly lived in a constant state of that blending of persons in love that Augustine describes. Thankfully, God patiently lives with our constant failures in this process. And, being as God is, God in a sense has no choice but to follow this approach, because the divine project, God's longterm goal, his driving passion, is to create a people as bound together in love as the Father and the Son are united in love by the Spirit; a new humanity; the Body of Christ.

And that is why we who believe without seeing are blessed: not because it's harder, so we deserve special congratulations, but because we have been caught up into God's project of bringing all things into unity in Christ. For that to happen we need to need each other, and God's love, God's life must be passed on by testimony and trust. We may prefer to engage with God independently, but God insists that we do so interdependently.

Sadly, we do not find this easy. It is a difficult blessedness. We are turned in upon ourselves in pride and fear, not the ideal place from which to learn to trust and love, to live interdependently. But the risen Jesus calls us to take our place gratefully in a new humanity in which our knowing is not a solitary exercise, but rather a gift from God through other people. We cannot find blessedness anywhere but in trusting testimony. The heart of the matter is that God does not offer us *independent* experience of the risen Jesus, but rather experience of the risen Jesus in the *interdependent* life of the Church. We depend on others to tell us the story of the risen Jesus and make it real in our life together; and all of us in the Church today depend on Christians who have come before us who have kept that story alive, going right back to the apostles, the first disciples, whose testimony about the risen Jesus is the essential foundation of our faith.

And are we trusting the right testimony in believing in the resurrection of Jesus? We can't be certain about that till the end, but we can grow in confidence, and again, we need each other for this to happen. Just as we do not come to believe in the resurrection of Jesus through direct perception, dependent on nobody else, but rather through trusting what others have told us, so it is *together* that we will grow in our knowledge of the risen Lord, in our life in the Body of Christ.

At the heart of this growing in the knowledge of the risen Jesus will be the rhythm of coming together to hear the word and receive the sacrament, and then being sent out into the world. That's why our regular Sunday by Sunday gathering is so vital: this is where we find the means given to us by God to grow in knowledge of the risen Jesus. As we listen to the scriptures together, and they are opened up to us, and as we break bread together, our hearts will burn within us and we will recognize Jesus in our midst. And as we go out together into the world, sent by Jesus in the power of the Spirit as he was sent by the Father, we will find him going before us.