

“Two Thousand Volt Bob” and “Doubting Thomas” –
A sermon for the second Sunday of Easter 2019 –John 20v.9 -31

Some forty years ago, there was a lad in Leeds who worked with me at St. George’s Crypt night-shelter. He was a cheerful young man, known to us all as “2000 volt Bob”. Why –you might ask–was he named in this way? Well, at his church, a charismatic church, he had received prayer and the laying on of hands. This experience had thrilled him, had changed him. When asked what it was like he had said, “*It was like 2000 volts surging through me.*” (Technically, he should have said 2000 Amps, but we let it go) To everybody, from that time on he was “2000 volt Bob.”

Perhaps it is unfair to name a person from just one experience of their lives, but moving on to this morning’s gospel, this is what we have done with Thomas. To countless generations, Thomas the Apostle is “*Doubting Thomas*” (all because of this one story recounted only in St. John’s gospel.) This is unfair, because Thomas was not the only one to doubt the reality of the Resurrection. They all doubted.

The gospels are united in having the women as the first witnesses, and it seems that the men did not believe them. The women told their story, but... “*these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them*” (Luke 24.11) The closing verses of St. Mark’s gospel (chapter 16) says the same thing. They would not believe Mary Magdalene (v.11). Neither would they believe the two disciples who met Jesus on the road (v.13). In Luke 24 where Jesus appeared to ten of them, they thought they were seeing a ghost and “*disbelieved for joy*” (v.41)

It clearly took some time for the disciples to believe the reality of what they were seeing. Whether it was over a period of forty days, as Luke suggests, we don’t know, but belief in the Resurrection wasn’t instant. It took time, as we would expect. Even at the final appearance in Matthew 28, (*sometimes called the great commission*) we read, even at that point, “*When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted.*” The Resurrection was never going to be an easy thing for the mind to grasp. There was still debate in the Church at Corinth. Paul writes a whole chapter (1 Cor 15) trying to convince some of his fellow Christians of the reality their own future hope and of

Christ's Resurrection, and when he mentioned Resurrection to those outside the Church, they would sometimes question Paul's sanity. In those years of imprisonment at Caesarea when he referred to the Resurrection in his defence speech, Festus the Governor called out, *"Paul, you are mad; your great learning is turning you mad."* (Acts 26.24) The Resurrection was never grasped easily, even by those who wanted to believe it. So we must not think that *"doubting Thomas"* was alone in his doubt.

Doubt, after all, is merely the shadow side of faith. It is there, to some extent, in us all, which is perhaps why Thomas is such a popular saint. Our outlook; our living with faith and doubt has much to do with our temperament. Thomas, for example was probably a pessimist by nature. For him, the glass was always more likely to be half-empty than half-full! Remember his words to the others, when he heard that Jesus was about to return to Judea, where his enemies were strongest: *"Let us also go that we may die with him"* (John 11v.16). He saw the dark side first. Unlike *"2000 volt Bob"*, Thomas wasn't always a laugh a minute. But there was a lovely honesty about him. When he felt bewildered, he said so; he didn't hide his confusion or his doubt. Think of his response to Jesus in the Upper Room after Jesus said, *"I go to prepare a place for you. You know where I am going."* Thomas came back, almost in frustration, *"Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"* and Jesus replied with the famous words, *"I am the Way, the Truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father except through me..."* (John 14). Thomas was an honest man. If he did not understand, he'd say so. If he did not believe, he'd say so.

Some of us are like Thomas and we may be glad that there is room for us in the Church, as well as those who are of a sunnier disposition and who may find belief more straightforward. Doubt is the shadow side of faith, but when that doubt becomes insistent, which it sometimes does, we should remind ourselves that the Mystery of the Resurrection is the only thing that can explain some rather startling facts.

The first is the emergence of the Church. There is no doubt that the disciples were terrified and broken people and that something remarkable must have happened to transform them. How is it that these frightened people were, within weeks, out on the streets of Jerusalem, proclaiming the Risen Jesus to the very people who had rejected him and condemned him? (See

this morning's other reading, Acts 5v.27-32). The Church would not have existed apart from the Resurrection.

Neither would Sunday be a "Holy Day". Isn't it astonishing that a group of Jews should transfer their sacred day from the Sabbath –the Saturday to the Lord's Day; the Sunday. Up till then, Sunday was always an ordinary working day; the day you went to the market or opened your shop or tilled the land. Whatever the Resurrection might mean, it was seen from earliest times as a specific event. "*On the third day*" is a phrase quoted by Paul in 1 Cor 15 and again by Peter (Acts 10.40). The empty tomb on the Sunday morning must have been part of the story from the start. The Resurrection was not just a vague sense of Christ's continued presence. It was "*on the Third Day*". It was on a Sunday morning.

And what else but the Resurrection can explain the exalted language which was being used to describe Jesus of Nazareth? "*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation*" (Col 1.15). "*In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God*" (the opening of St. John). He is "*Lord of all*" (Peter in Acts 10) -a dangerous thing to say in an Empire ruled by Caesar-or Thomas here in today's gospel, addressing Jesus as "*My Lord and my God.*" The only apostle to address Christ so, and an almost unthinkable thing for a Jew to say.

The Christian Faith itself arises from belief in the Resurrection. Without this event, there would have been no faith, no Church and no Sunday in any special holy sense. To those who might argue that the Easter story is merely a great work of fiction, we would have to ask: is it likely that the disciples would invent a story and then go out and die for the truth of it, as many of them did? Or is it likely that men so shattered by the crucifixion of Jesus and the death of all their hopes would be so inventive, so creative? Think of times you have been at your lowest. Were you at your most inventive, your most creative? A work of fiction would surely describe the disciples as heroes and as more than ready to believe, but the gospels show them as anything but heroic and as slow to believe what they are seeing. Again, a work of fiction, written to convince outsiders would hardly use women as the first witnesses. In those days, a woman's evidence counted for nothing.

There is-it seems to me- a strong sense of truthfulness about the gospel narratives. The untidiness of the accounts is convincing. The contradictions between the gospels is convincing. It is what you would expect from a genuine event. No doubt there are legendary additions like Matthew's angel rolling away the stone and sitting on it (Matt 28.2)...but this doesn't detract from the core truth at the heart of the story. When the voice of doubt sounds loudest, I remind myself of the sheer strength and authentic feel of these gospel accounts. Belief in the Resurrection is at the centre of the Christian Faith; it is the reason for it. Sometimes we may hold this belief firmly, other times wistfully. Sometimes we can feel overwhelmed by doubt .So much depends on our temperament, on our time of life, or on our own circumstances. Sometimes we cling on to God, though there doesn't feel much to cling onto.

We believe not only as individuals, but as a Church family and at times of stress or of doubt, we are here to support each other. Thomas was not kicked out of the fellowship because he thought for a time that the others were talking nonsense. He kept within the fellowship until he could believe again, and he wasn't just "*Doubting Thomas*." He went on to do great things. By tradition he travelled as far as India and planted the first Christian communities there. In South India, he is venerated as the founder of the Mar Thoma Church, that ancient church which bears his name today. So whether we are a "*2000 volt Bob*" or a "*Doubting Thomas*", we can be glad there is a place for us in the Church family; this family which proclaims the Resurrection, and as God still had a use for Thomas, perhaps he may have a use for us too?