

**Easter 2 Low Sunday**  
**11/4/2010**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Acts 5:27 - 32**

**Psalm 150**

**Revelation 1:4 - 8**

**John 20:19 - 31**

**These things are written that you may believe**

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After the experience of a high we often have to grapple with a let down. Perhaps we have had a terrific holiday and then suffer over going back to work. Or perhaps we held a fantastic party or family celebration, and then have to face the leaving of loved guests, and the cleaning up.

The Second Sunday of Easter is sometimes called “Low Sunday”. While the alleluias still ring in our ears, we hear of Thomas, who after a week of stubborn resistance finally came to embrace resurrection faith. He was absent when Jesus came to the others that first Sunday evening. Anyone who has arrived at a party after the main celebration is over can empathise with Thomas. The disciples were high as kites. Why should he accept the unbelievable things they were saying? No faith without proof he said and a week later his mind was still set. Like Moses in the desert, Thomas asked to see the glory of God but when the last thing he expected happened his desire to see and feel and know, any sense of self-righteousness he had, seems to have melted away in the encounter with the Risen Christ.

It is clear from the resurrection narratives that what happened at the first Easter was something new and so different it was at first incomprehensible. Only John tells the story of Thomas whose doubts happen in a context where belief and unbelief are all mixed up together. Earlier, on Easter morning the beloved disciple John (who ran to the garden with Peter) saw the empty tomb and believed, but Peter did not. Mary Magdalene, who saw the empty tomb and found in it only a source of sorrow, met the Risen One but only came to believe when he spoke to her. And as we heard that night when the ten fearful disciples were gathered behind locked doors Jesus appeared to them. Notice what he did: he showed them his hands and his side. The glorified One is none other than he who carried the wounds of the Cross, and this connection is fundamental to the new faith that was born in the ten (v 20). The peace he brought included knowing that the life that was in him was not defeated by suffering and death. But for Thomas having such faith on the basis of their reports was not enough. He wanted tangible proof. For the rest of Christian history he earned himself the nickname “the doubter”, but the leaders of the early church also thanked him for his scepticism because it led to his confession. “My Lord and my God” (v 28) goes beyond everything said so far and takes us right back to John’s prologue: “In the beginning was the Word...”. Thomas the doubter was the first to name Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified as the divine Son of God.

The story of Thomas shows faith can and does come to those who harbour doubts, who were not present during times of peak experiences of faith and who resist the witness of others. In fact one reading of this story is that the Risen Christ comes especially to those of uncertain faith. And when that happens we see that fear and doubt present no barrier to his gifts of life and peace in the Spirit. And it is also clear this encounter with Jesus was life transforming.

When in John Jesus breathes the Spirit on the disciples and sends them out as the Father sent him on a ministry of forgiveness, this is John's version of Pentecost. Here we see the calling and the commissioning of the church in continuity with what John strongly emphasises: the love between the Father and Jesus and Jesus and the Father and through Jesus God's love for the world. When Jesus gives his Peace and breathes the Spirit, the followers are joined into God's mission of love a mission, which has reached us today. Thomas may have come late to faith but he was not left out of God's mission and he continued to decide for that mission. While there is some uncertainty about the particulars of his missionary activity there is no doubt Thomas set out for the uttermost parts of the earth to share the faith he, in his doubt, came to have. We know this because of his reputation in India, where a church exists that still bears his name. And there is also a tradition of him having been present in what today we call Iran. Thomas' scepticism and his quest to see the glory of God did not lead to a life of endless introverted self-development. It moved him out to share with others the amazing news of what God had done for the world in Jesus Christ.

There was a man who had a more or less secular upbringing during the 1930s and 40s in Germany. As a young man he experienced great suffering during the Second World War. At the end of the war he was sent to a prisoner of war camp in Scotland where he suffered from depression and a lack of hope. Two experiences turned his life around: his encounters with friendly Scottish workingmen and their families, and the gift of a Bible given to him by a Chaplain who visited the camp. He began to read the Bible and found in the lament of Psalm 39 something that resonated with his soul and led him to call out to God. Then he read Mark's Gospel and was riveted by Jesus' death cry: "My God, why have you forsaken me." He said: "I felt growing within me the conviction that [here] is someone who understands you completely, who is with you in your cry to God and has felt the same forsakenness you are living in now". "I began to understand the assailed, forsaken Christ... [and] I summoned up the courage to live again, and I was slowly but surely seized by a great hope for the resurrection into God's 'wide space [and uncramped space]'" "This perception of Christ did not come all of a sudden... but it became more and more important to me and I read the story of the passion again and again... I have never decided for Christ once and for all, as is often demanded of us. I have decided again and again in specific terms for the discipleship of Christ, when situations were serious and it was necessary. But right down to the present day, after almost 60 years, I am certain that then, in 1945, in the Scottish prisoner of war camp, in the dark pit of my soul, Jesus sought and found me." [Jurgen Moltmann, *A Broad Place*, p 30] The person who wrote those words is Jurgen Moltmann who as a result of this encounter went on to become a theologian, one of the most significant of our century. He began by writing a *Theology of Hope*, went on to write deeply about the cross of Christ. He linked up with the many different currents of theology that developed in our time, worked to promote the interests of many groups seeking clarity of faith and liberation from oppression, and is rightly seen as a world leader in the Christian Church.

At the end of the Gospel reading John wrote:

*Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that though believing you may have life in his name. (20:30 – 31)*

After the deep joy of the Easter celebrations it may seem a let down that doubting Thomas is our subject today, but he is in fact the man for us. Because of him we see coming to Easter faith is not automatic. There was doubt, there were difficulties and life at that time had its dark moments. Low Sunday is for telling that whatever form of darkness we know cannot prevent this new life from reaching us. We cannot stand outside the empty tomb, or meet in the upper room. Like Thomas we have to rely on the stories of others. Thanks to John, and many people in the church down the centuries, we have a collection of “things that are written” that mysteriously have life in their words. Life that has the power to drive back the doubt and darkness and clear a space for new life to flourish in us, and among us, to the praise of God.

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