

**Easter 2**  
**28/4/2019**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Acts 5:27-32**  
**Psalm 118**  
**John 20:19-31**

### **The Pointy End of John's Gospel**

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Peter Blackwood

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How was Thomas to know that the end of the story could change? Everyone knows that when a person is dead and buried, that is the end of the story. Friends and loved-ones will go on with their lives changed but it will not include the living presence of the deceased. How was Thomas to know that the Jesus story would not end like all other human stories?

Thomas is the archetypal sceptic. John's gospel sets Thomas up as the sceptic on behalf of all the sceptics in the church through the whole life of the church.

It is a dramatic device that helps to draw us into the story. Sue and I recently saw an opera that had a changed ending. A character in the drama expressed the emotions of the audience on our behalf. Wagner's *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg* traditionally finishes with the girl standing looking adoringly beside her man as he succumbs to the sickeningly nationalistic arguments of the chorus and accepts the invitation to join the Singers in order to strengthen the domination of their culture. In a recent production of the opera the girl, without a word said (or sung) indicates her distain for what is being argued and her man's compliance with the invitation. Instead of joining the cast in their adulations, she storms off stage. As the arguments to join the singers unfolds the audience grows in its understanding of why this opera was so loved by Hitler. The heroine's reaction expresses the horror of a modern post World War II audience and makes it known on our behalf.

Thomas is the dramatic sceptic on behalf of us all. He will not believe that Jesus is alive until he sees him and touches the wounds by which he was killed. Time for a trivia question. How do we know that Jesus was nailed to the cross? Answer: because Thomas mentioned the marks of the nails in his hands. This is the only time in any of the gospels that nails are mentioned in connection with Jesus' crucifixion. It was usual for the crucified to be with attached by rope. *The Life of Brian* is the best evidence for this.

So, Thomas stands as the representative sceptic to the resurrection. He does not explore any of the common conspiracy theories as to why the disciples thought they were seeing the Lord. They make intriguing reading – they include the idea that there was a quick substitute made at Golgotha, or that he only seemed to die. My favourite suggests that he was resuscitated and moved to the south of France with Mary Magdalene. No, Dan Brown did not invent that conspiracy.

So, how does John's dramatic device work in his story of Thomas? Mary Magdalene told disciples that the stone had been rolled away. Peter and the Beloved Disciple inspected the empty tomb and then went home. Mary stayed in the garden and met who she thought was a gardener. Some art work I have seen recently explains her mistake. Jesus is depicted carrying a spade – very helpful. At the sound of her name she recognised the Lord. Mary is the first witness to the resurrection, and she tells the disciples. The same day Jesus appeared to the disciples and showed them his hands and side and breathed the Holy Spirit upon them.

So far belief has been dependant on seeing the risen Lord. It is not enough for Thomas to be told by the disciples. Belief for Thomas will require the same evidence as the others had. Seeing Jesus and the marks of crucifixion – the signs that the one who was dead is alive.

John the evangelist is starting to come to the pointy end of his gospel. If there is one purpose for his telling the story of Jesus that stands out above all others it is that the world should believe. The other gospel writers have a similar purpose, but John mentions the purpose at every opportunity. The word 'believe' arises nearly 100 times. That is why this part of the story is a pointy end. The circle of believers is opening out.

John courageously raises the possibility of doubt. In the late 1970s John Westerhoff, an American Christian Educationalist, visited Melbourne. One of the things he advocated was that the church tends to be in too much of a hurry to confirm and or baptise its members too young. He advocated that there should be a rite of passage for adolescents in which they are enrolled as catechumens and given permission to doubt, and that this rite should be celebrated on the feast of St Thomas.

In John's story he grapples with the issue of doubt. But, more importantly, he deals with the issue of belief, of coming to faith. The intention of Thomas is that he will be the man of action. He will see Jesus. He will put his finger in the nail prints. He will put his hand in the spear wound. But faith is a gift of God not a human accomplishment. It is a gift to the first disciples who saw and touched and to those who follow who say they cannot see and touch Jesus. In the event all the action is initiated by Jesus. Thomas looks and does not touch. Artists have led us astray on this point too. In some he conducts a gruesome forensic inspection. That is not how John tells it.

Thomas encounters the risen Christ and makes his monumental proclamation. No one has seen the situation in quite the same way as Thomas does at this moment. Yes, in Mark and Matthew the centurion acknowledges Jesus as God's son, but in John it is Thomas who makes the credal statement, 'My Lord and my God'. This is the pointy end because it ties right back to where John started – 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' Thomas is given the insight the one they all called 'Lord' is God.

Faith is Christ as Lord and God is not my accomplishment. It is given me in the church. It is in the church among other believing and doubting Christians that I discover Jesus alive. It is in the church with all its complicated structures, its petty disputes, its incompetence, its scandals, with all its signs of antichrist, nevertheless the Spirit of Jesus who taught love and forgiveness in the face of hate and vengeance, who touched the contaminated with compassion, who gave sight and insight and life, and who did this on a backdrop of complicated structures, petty disputes, incompetence and scandal.

The living light of Christ blazes precisely because he is set on a dark canvass. The resurrected life of Christ is set right up against the crucified death of Jesus. For me it works like art. In order for the artist to depict a bright image there must be dark shadow. Take a look at how artists depict light particularly in art depicting sunlight, just how much and how dark the shadow is. Without shadow, the eye cannot perceive that the sun is shining.

We await a day when the light of Christ will be perfectly perceived in a place where our perceptions will not need shadow or death.

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