

**Easter 2**  
**7/4/2024**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**John 20:19-31**  
**1 John 1:1-2:2**

**Thomas the Doubter**

Sermon preached by Daniel Broadstock

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Friends as we consider our text today, I am mindful that two occasions of cultural significance have occurred over the past week. The first is Easter Sunday – the ringing day of joy and disorienting triumph at the risen Christ’s conquest over death. The second is April Fool’s Day.

I wonder what these two days might have to do with each other. Perhaps more than we might imagine.

Were you fooled this week, friends? One great example of comic deception I saw this year was a post on social media by Jim Penman, the head of Jim’s business empire (responsible for Jim’s mowing, Jim’s plumbing, etc) announcing the formation of Jim’s Political Party, offering a pragmatic, practical, common-sense platform to bring down housing costs and end the dysfunction on Spring St. Finally, a man to take a whippersnapper to the weeds growing in our political system. Very amusing!

On the other hand, I have a friend who hates April Fool’s Day. She thinks pranks are mean-spirited and the tricks and stunts of the day to be tedious and annoying. So, all through April 1 she holds herself in a state of sceptical readiness – on her guard, alert and vigilant, determined not to be made a fool of.

In our text today, Thomas holds himself in a similar state of determined scepticism. He says the famous words: "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." For this moment of disbelief, theological history has branded him Doubting Thomas.

Consider the resonance of those words. Thomas does not say that he ‘does not believe’. He is not professing an intellectual absence of belief. He is not a neutral agnostic. He is not a post-Enlightenment modernist, scorning the possibility of the miraculous subversion of nature’s laws. Thomas is not a philosopher or a physician. Thomas *will not* believe.

What’s going on here? We may lack conviction in all manner of things. But to refuse to believe – that is something different. There is more there than meets the eye.

It’s tempting to read the acts of the disciples as shallow theological parables. Vignettes, offering simple lessons of faith. Read superficially, Thomas offers a straightforward moral: trust God. Believe in Him. Persevere through doubt. Do not be troubled by what seems to you to be impossible, but hold fast to the promises of God.

Not necessarily a bad moral at all. Perhaps an encouragement that we need more than we realise.

But I remind myself that Jesus’ disciples are not fictional characters. They are real, historical human beings. Complex, contradictory, flawed. Subject to all kinds of influences, wishes, concerns, fears, and motivations. The Gospel writers have theological agendas in the way they include and frame their narrative, but there is flesh and blood behind the text.

Take Judas, for instance. He plays a simple role in our story. We need him to play his part in order to bring about the dramatic climax of Good Friday. But Judas too is only a man. Why does Judas betray Jesus?

The Bible suggests one explanation when it speaks of ‘the Devil’ entering Judas as he sits at the table with Jesus. Perhaps we can identify with that experience – moments of sudden, involuntary impulses to evil and to violence. Sometimes we recognise them, sometimes we don’t. Sometimes we resist them, and sometimes we give in. Perhaps Judas’ betrayal was a terrible moment of surrendered temptation. Sometimes people who have been convicted of violent crimes speak of this. An instant of almost demonic madness, in which everything is changed irrevocably forever.

Others have thought Judas an envious figure. Hovering always at the shadowy edge of Jesus’ brightness, perhaps he couldn’t bear any longer to be the second man. Jealousy has the power to drive us to places that we’d never have believed that we could go. Perhaps in the early hours of the morning, Judas would lie unsleeping, imagining himself as Messiah. Imagining the crown upon his own head. Hearing the hosannas cry out for Judas Iscariot.

Perhaps in the end it was not vice at all that drove Judas to Caiaphas, but frustrated longing. Some have seen in Judas a radical, a zealot. Maybe it was political liberation he longed for. The long-awaited uprising against Roman oppression with the Messiah, the new David, riding at the head of its army. Maybe Judas had grown tired of hearing about the Kingdom of God instead of the Kingdom of Israel. Maybe he is impatient with spiritual and moral teaching. Maybe he doesn’t want to love his enemy. Maybe he is tired of forgiveness. Maybe by leading those temple guards into the garden he hoped to waken Jesus from his slumber, that it would be the striking of the match, the first trumpet-call of a new and momentous age.

I wonder if something of this kind is taking place with our Thomas.

Doubt is so rarely a matter of indifferent scepticism. When Thomas says, ‘I do not believe’, that is not the voice of incredulity. That is the voice of pain. Those are the words of fear. Thomas is afraid. Terrorised by that most painful wound of all – disappointed hope. For Thomas had already drunk too deeply from that cup. He had already surrendered his heart to that cross-shattered illusion. He had already wept too long for that buried fantasy. No, says Thomas. I will not endure that black agony a second time. I will not expose my heart again to the knife. I will not believe. My hopes are ash, and I will not suffer them to be reignited.

Disappointment is a terrible thing. When a long yearning for marriage goes unsatisfied. When paths that we thought would always be open to us are closed by age, or injury, or illness. When long-held, secret dreams and ambitions come to nothing. When a husband or wife with whom we expected to grow old just slips away.

The worst of it is that when once we have tasted the bitterness of disappointment we look sceptically at every cup that is then offered to us. We do not allow ourselves to trust in joy. There is a spectre that haunts our mind in the midst of hope. It arises like a ghost from the grave of past hopes long dead. And it whispers to us, ‘This is not real. It shall not last. Your joy will pass away and when it does it will subside with such a dreadful agony that you will wish that you had never known it.’ It is not a malicious thing really, but arises from a dark, self-protective corner of ourselves that knows that a heart that is entirely given may be entirely broken. For disappointment is not merely sadness. Disappointment humiliates us for having had the audacity to have been happy.

But in Jesus, the disciples' hopes had seemed so secure, so safe. Surely this Nazarene was not one of those false saviours with each of whom Israel's hopes had risen and fallen so pitifully. For with Jesus it was no longer a matter of hope. Their eyes had beheld his miracles and their ears had rung with his authority. The skies and waves themselves had seemed to shimmer and bend away from him in awe. And so Thomas had placed his fragile heart, whole and entire, at the feet of Jesus, sure that he would keep it safe. But then Jesus had borne it to Calvary and nailed it to the cross.

So when Peter came bursting into that room Thomas had no more heart to give. How could Peter do this to me again? How could he be cruel enough to raise a second seed of hope only to crush it beneath his heel. For if Jesus was not the one, then no one ever could be. If this good shepherd, this man whom earth and sky obeyed, this healer and exorcist, this prophet and teacher, if this man was not the Messiah, then our Messiah is never coming, and nothing will ever be good and true again.

But Thomas had merely glimpsed the beginning and mistaken it for the ending. For when Jesus strode from that empty tomb he carried Thomas' poor heart in his hands like a delicate treasure. He had kept it safe through Hell and death and brought it out again to the sun. And in that darkened upstairs room, as Thomas touched the scars on his palms and felt his side, smoothed over with vulnerable grace, Jesus gave Thomas' heart back to him.

May we be so bold as to open ourselves to the fear of disappointment. Not to make ourselves free of doubt, but to make ourselves vulnerable, and let the healed hands and feet of Jesus lead us again on the road of discipleship.

Amen.

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