

The Gospel reading for today tells the familiar story of Thomas Didymus, also known as Doubting Thomas.

This disciple found it impossible to believe the story told by the other disciples that they had seen the risen Christ.

Thomas declared that he needed to see the physical wounds in Jesus' hands and side for himself, before he would believe that Jesus had been resurrected from the dead, and thus he inherited the disparaging nickname of *Doubting Thomas*.

I must say that I have a great deal of sympathy for Thomas I'm prone to do myself. I doubt it for example that I'd be able to get here today in view of the weather. Furthermore, I can very much relate to his scepticism.

I also know that scepticism and doubts are not always much welcomed in Christian circles despite the messaging we may be giving out. People very quickly become defensive when core beliefs like the resurrection, virgin birth etc are being questioned.

Tell the story of my home group experience where I felt judged for expressing my doubts about the resurrection.

Doubt refers to a state of uncertainty, a lack of conviction regarding the truth of something. It means to waiver or to be in two minds.

I think we are being too hard on Thomas Didymus when we call him *Doubting Thomas* in that disparaging way.

Surely, it is a natural human response to seek evidence for what we are being asked to believe? Surely it is never more necessary in this day of AI and Fake news to have healthy doubts or to put it more kindly to be discerning in what we choose to believe?

Why is it that church communities are so easily threatened by the questions and the doubts people have as they explore their faith?

Ironically, while the people who make up the church may judge us for our doubts, Jesus certainly doesn't.

Jesus understands that Faith is seated in doubt. Faith is learning to trust him without necessarily understanding what we believe.

See John 20: 29 where he blesses those who have not yet seen but still believe.

I am not talking here about the excuses that we sometimes palm off as doubts; nor am I referring to uninformed prejudice, nor to obstinacy fuelled by the fear of change.

No, I am talking about good, honest questions born out of an authentic search for the truth. How easy is it for us to safely explore our doubts in a Christian context?

Like all Christ followers, I have no doubt that Thomas wanted to believe in the resurrection, but in all honesty, like me, before he could do so, he had to work through his doubts first.

However, once he had worked through his doubts, in the presence of Jesus, he emerged as an awe-inspiring follower of Christ. He may not have understood how the resurrection had occurred but he came to a place where he was in all humility able to accept the resurrection as a matter of faith.

His doubt was transformed into faith.

In this sense Thomas is a kind of role model for how we might use our doubts as opportunities to grow a resilient, robust, honest faith in Jesus.

Let's take a look at the Gospel reading for today.

This reading contains two stories actually.

In the first story Thomas is not present.

We find a group of disciples in the Upper Room. They are despondent because Jesus has been executed. They are terrified that the same fate may await them also. In the midst of their fear Jesus shows up and reassures them that he is not dead. He shows them the wounds to his hands and his side. They recognize him and rejoice at seeing him. He then commissions them with the words:

*"As the Father sent me so I send you".*

And then just as God breathed life into Adam at the time of Creation, so Jesus breathes spiritual life into the faith of those present in the Upper Room and commands them to go out into the world to be his hands, his feet and his voice in the world. "

In the second story one week later, Thomas is present.

He is sceptical of the disciples' story that the resurrected Jesus had appeared to them.

Once again Jesus enters the house where the disciples are assembled. This time he personally addresses Thomas with physical proof that he is alive. Thomas falls to his knees and makes a profound confession of faith surrendering his life to Jesus with the words: *My Lord and my God*. So it is that the writer of John's Gospel gives Thomas the Doubter, the weighty task of summarizing the whole purpose of his Gospel: that the reader may believe that Jesus is God incarnate.

This astonishing revelation finally comes to us through the man we all remember as "Doubting Thomas".

Isn't that ironic?

Do you have doubts about what you are being asked to believe about God?

Are you embarrassed about those doubts, perhaps even ashamed of them?

Today I want to reassure you that God does not judge you for what you find difficult to believe. Rather God offers to use your doubts to help you build a robust faith, just as he used Thomas' doubts to transform his faith into a robust one.

Faith is the flipside the positive side of that

I am going to draw now on the work of the theologian John Westerhoff to describe how our doubts can be used to deepen our faith .

Westerhoff identified 4 stages we go through in the development and maturation of our faith. He used the analogy of rings in a tree to describe this process of maturation.

Each ring he said remains as another ring grows around it.

Let's use Thomas as an example of how this model for faith development works.

### 1. The first ring is known as *Experiential Faith*.

At the core of each of our beliefs are the beliefs that someone who nurtured us spiritually shared with us. This is the faith of the messenger or evangelist who inspired us and made an indelible impression on us and so created the foundation of our own faith. For some of us this may have been our parents, or a friend, or a teacher or an evangelist.

I wonder if you can recall who that was for you?

In Thomas' case it was a Jewish rabbi named Jesus.

In this first ring of faith we find ourselves **imitating** the faith of others without quite owning it ourselves.

At a gut level it *feels* right and so we pursue it.

We are for a time dependent on others to fuel and inform what we believe and in this stage our faith is fairly vulnerable.

Thomas displays this ring of faith when Jesus announces to his disciples that he will be leaving them. Thomas panics at the thought of not having Jesus physically present in their lives and so blurts out:

"We don't know where you are going, how can we know the way?"

Jesus reassures him by saying: "I am the way the truth and the life."

New Christians often find themselves in this first stage of faith.

### 2. The second ring of faith is known as *Affiliative Faith*

This is when we start to display the beliefs and practices of the church, youth group or faith community we attend.

We start to take on the distinctiveness of the community with which we have identified and aligned ourselves. Belonging to St George's is one way in which you may be expressing your affiliative faith and so another ring is formed around the first ring. A sense of **belonging and loyalty** is key in forming our faith during this period.

Thomas displays this sense of belonging when he encourages the disciples to accompany Jesus on the dangerous journey to visit Lazarus who is dying in Bethany.

You may recall that Bethany was where the Jewish authorities had tried unsuccessfully to stone Jesus to death.

### 3. The third ring which forms itself around the first two rings is known as *Searching Faith*

In this stage we become aware that our personal beliefs or experiences may no longer be identical to those of the family or church or group to which we belong. In this stage we begin to question some of the commonly held beliefs or practices, and express doubts about some of what we have been taught or told. We **search** for a faith we can authentically call our own .

This is a stage of questioning, doubting and challenging. Thomas displays this stage in today's Gospel reading as he refutes what the other disciples have told him and instead seeks to meet the resurrected Christ for himself.

4. The fourth ring of faith is known as Owned Faith.

This ring emerges from honest searching and questioning.

After exploring the question:

Is this what I believe?

We come to the place where we can confidently declare:

“this is what I believe”.

In this ring, we personally own our faith and we make a profound personal commitment to what we believe.

This is when we are truly able to give our lives to the Lord in every sense of the word.

Thomas has reached this stage when he declares before Jesus “My Lord and my God.”

Each ring is needed in the development of a robust faith.

What I am trying to say is that like Thomas, our doubts can become opportunities, gateways, to growing a deeper faith.

While we are on this earth, we will never fully understand or gain absolute certainty around all we are required to believe as Christians.

However, we can with the help of the Holy Spirit, use the compost of our doubts and uncertainties to transition from experiential through affiliative and searching faith to Owned Faith.

Back to the all too common experience I had in my Bible Study.

Imagine a Christian Community where it was safe to authentically move through each of the rings articulating and discussing our doubts in a nurturing environment.

How much more authentic would the faith of its members be?

Our goal as the body of Christ needs to be, to give each other support and space to work through the doubts that beset our faith so that the Holy Spirit can transform our faith into the powerful faith Thomas displayed at the end of our reading.

Oral tradition has it that the faith of Thomas was robust enough to take him on an evangelical mission to places as far flung as Kerala in India.

Thomas would eventually be martyred for this faith.

Surely this is the kind of authentic faith we should all strive to grow in our lives?

This is the kind of faith to live for and if necessary, to die for.

This is the kind of faith that inspires others to believe in Jesus’.

No doubt, the stronger our faith the more effective we can be in the work Jesus has called us to.

We tell Christ’s story best when we have a faith we own for ourselves.

So, in Conclusion, let us remember  
that Jesus did not scold Thomas for his doubts.

He showed him the nail prints just as he had shown the nail prints to the other disciples the previous week.

God understands our doubts.

Honest questioning is an indication of a growing faith.

If we are asking questions of God or seeking answers from God, we are demonstrating that our faith is important to us.

Courses like: Alpha; home groups; youth group; Bible study and spiritual direction can all be opportunities to do this. And why we will never have certainty while we still live here on earth our searching, our doubts and our questions are opportunities for us to grow a faith that will give us the confidence to be effective evangelists for the Gospel of Jesus Christ and this owned faith will enable us to fulfill the commission which Jesus himself bestowed upon us, his church:

“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”