The Benefit of Doubt

Rev’d Balabanski

Easter 2A – John 20.19-31

There’s an extremely well-worn old proposition that doubts Jesus really died on the cross. It says Jesus just passed out, the Roman soldiers mistakenly thought he was dead, and they let people take away his body to be buried. So presumably, after a 48-hour sleep, Jesus woke up so well rested from the exertions of his passion and crucifixion that he could unwrap himself, and unnoticed by the guard outside, push a ton or so of limestone aside and wander off to look for his friends. So it’s a lovely thing that our prayer for the day calls God *the hope of those who doubt*.

Doubt *can* be a very healthy thing. Today’s gospel is one that people often call the story of doubting Thomas. And the doubt Thomas expresses is an extraordinary gift; so extraordinary that the writer lets this doubt eclipse other very important things in this story. What things? For one, this is when Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit on his disciples and gives them the same authority to forgive and heal that he exercised during his own ministry: [22] *Jesus breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.* [23] *If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”* Enormously significant! These gifts are foundational to the Church. We recognise them at Pentecost, at ordinations, every Sunday – and yet they almost take a back seat at this point in John’s Gospel.

What else? What were the first things Jesus did when he appeared to his disciples – before Thomas came? Listen again: [19] *Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.”* [20] *After he said this, he showed them his hands and his*

side. The first thing Jesus does is to show them that this body of his *is* the same one that was crucified just days earlier. He shows them before Thomas declares that he won't believe until he's seen and touched Jesus' wounds. So what Jesus does isn't provoked by Thomas' doubt. It's a statement that Jesus makes of his own accord.

This passage is full of things we still do to express our faith as the gathered body of Christ. It's very like our Church services. We share Christ's peace like he did in this story. The Spirit descends on the gathered community. The authority to forgive sins is exercised, and blessing is given to everyone. This passage gives us much that is central to Christianity.

But what really gives this passage its force is the presence of the physical flesh of the risen Jesus – shown to the disciples at the beginning, and offered again to Thomas at the end. Thomas' confession of faith – *my Lord and my God* – is the high point of this amazing passage; it's the proper response to the Word made flesh.

The absolutely central symbol of our faith is Jesus' own physical risen body. And we are his body; like Jesus' body was, the temple of the Holy Spirit. The doubt, expressed by Thomas and the many who have known it since is answered by Jesus. His answer inspires us to proclaim Christ risen to every new generation. Doubters are God's gift to us. Their integrity calls us to proclaim the Jesus we know – as it did our patron John who wrote *so that* we *may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing* we *may have life in his name.*

So let's be grateful to the doubters; let's be grateful for our own doubts. Doubt is our opportunity to explore ever more deeply the mystery and the grace of God becoming one of us – our opportunity to work it through when we are ten, twenty, thirty and forty and seventy and ninety and a hundred – so

that we don’t have to live in our old age with the faith of the young person we used to be. Doubt is something God transforms into the gift of spiritual growth.

As well as all that, our Gospel today says that physical bodies are important to the Christian faith. Our faith is not just about what popularly gets called the saving of souls. Our faith is in Jesus, our God, who experienced real doubt, mortal life and death, just like we do. What does that mean about the way we live out that faith.

I think a helpful answer was given by Rowan Williams.

It should not need saying, but it must be said: our Christian faith is a faith in the rising of Jesus Christ from the tomb in his glorified body; and so it is about leading lives that take the life of the body seriously. The words for salvation and health cannot be distinguished in most languages, and this should remind us that faith in Christ has to be bound up with care for suffering bodies as well as suffering souls.

Only Christ can make us whole in every aspect of our lives. But we can show the world something of the nature of that comprehensive hope in Christ as we put our energies to work for healing. First we have to begin to learn what it is for each one of us to receive healing: quietly and thankfully, we must let our wounds be exposed to the physician and allow his life to sink into our lives. And then we must act as if we believed we had truly received authority to heal – in all sorts of different ways.

Each Sunday here, we share healing ministry in faith and trepidation. It’s a miniature of what we do with every step in our lives. We journey in hope that in God’s grace, each step will reveal a blessing; like the benefit of doubt. Amen.