An invitation to trust

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Doubt. It's interesting that doubt is part of the Easter season. It's only a week ago that we were celebrating the triumph of Easter. But today, we follow the lead of John's Gospel, and welcome doubt into our midst.

We have the little gem of a story about Thomas – often called doubting Thomas, though we're not going to call him that today. We'll think up some different names as we go along.

Doubt. It's part of the Easter season in John's Gospel – and it's part of the Easter story in Matthew as well.

NRS **Matthew 28:17** When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.

So doubt is part of the Easter story – it sits alongside faith, and alongside worship.

Is it the opposite of faith?

Is it the pathway to faith?

A spiritual 'growing pain'?

Or is it faith's companion?

Before we try and answer that question, let's think a bit more about Thomas.

Thomas is mentioned in all the lists of disciples in Matthew, Mark and Luke and also in Acts. He's in the middle of the group, number 7 or 8, not at the top of the list with Peter, James John and Andrew, nor at the bottom with Judas Iscariot, but in the middle. If these lists were a team photo, Thomas would be in the second row – definitely there, but tucked

away and a little bit blurry. (Matthew 10:3 Mark 3:18 Luke 6:15 Acts 1:13).

The Thomas we meet in John's Gospel is much more prominent. Here he has a much clearer character.

We first meet him in John 11:16, when Jesus makes the dangerous decision to go back to Jerusalem to be with Lazarus' family.

Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Clearly, Thomas grasps what's at stake here straight away. Going back to Jerusalem at this point puts Jesus' life in danger, and all his followers in danger as well.

But Thomas doesn't try to persuade Jesus not to go – he speaks up in support of this decision. I'd call that a brave, clear-sighted and faithful response. So we might call him Thomas the brave, or Thomas the clear-sighted on the basis of this passage.

The next time we meet him is during the Last Supper. Jesus is teaching the disciples that he is about to go away and prepare a place for them, assuring them that they will join him there.

John 14:5 Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

So Thomas here is a spokesperson for the others. Again, he's rather brave to try to clarify things, but he's also a bit out of his depth.

If this is a plan for a strategic withdrawal, he needs to hear it spelled out a bit more clearly. He's not backwards in calling a spade a spade. We might call him Thomas the straight talker.

The third and final time that we meet Thomas is in our passage today, where he is not going to take anyone's word without proof:

"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."

Thomas is still brave, though in a different way now. He still calls a spade a spade. Here he might be called the patron saint of scientific method: he stipulates that he requires visual and tactile sensory data to draw the same conclusions as his colleagues. Good on him! We might want to drop the nickname doubting Thomas altogether, and instead call him Thomas the proto-scientist!

In the event, of course, when Thomas actually encounters Jesus, he doesn't do so with his scientist's hat on, and subject Jesus to a series of experiments. Jesus invites him to do so, saying "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side." But we are not told that Thomas does those things.

Then Jesus says, literally, Do not continue to be unbelieving but believing."

The Greek word for believing – *pistis* – also means trusting. To believe is not a set of prescribed ideas that you sign up to, but a posture of trust. When Jesus says these words, it means 'trust me'.

Trust me. Thomas had trusted Jesus in being willing to come back with him to Jerusalem, maybe to die. He had trusted Jesus enough to ask the question: How can we know the way? He needed to decide to trust Jesus standing before him.

And that's what Thomas did – he entrusted himself to Jesus whom even the ugliest of deaths did not silence – to the Risen Jesus who was still his friend and now clearly more than just

a friend. He simply says ‘My Lord and my God.’

What does entrusting ourselves to Jesus as our Lord and God mean in this time of pandemic?

Clearly it doesn’t mean assuming that we are immune to suffering. Jesus wasn’t immune to the infectious hate that put him to death. But it does mean entrusting ourselves to God’s goodness, knowing that we are part of a bigger picture, and that God is bringing about healing and wholeness, even in the midst of suffering and death.

The story of Thomas doesn’t end there. There are other writings – The Gospel of Thomas, the Book of Thomas and the Acts of Thomas, and there’s the tomb of Thomas in India, in Chennai, which Peter and I visited when we worked for the Diocese of Madras. If you are interested in reading more about the Thomas traditions, I would be happy to lend you this book called Resurrection Reconsidered by Gregory Riley, or a copy of the Gospel of Thomas.

Doubt is part of the Easter story. For some it’s a pathway or growing pain, for others it’s a long-term companion; for some it feels like a closed door. But the Easter story is an invitation to trust – to risk a posture of trusting that God might just be like Jesus of Nazareth – loving, generous, good.

Our friend Thomas, the brave, clear-sighted, proto-scientific disciple decides to trust Jesus as his Lord and his God.

My prayer is that we might do so too.