

In the next few weeks, alongside the Resurrection stories, we are going to be reading the first letter of John. He is probably the same person as the gospel writer and he was writing to some house churches in Ephesus. There had been a crisis and this was a form of damage control. John assures the churches that, for those who are still trusting in Jesus the Messiah, God is with them as they adhere to the truth. Most of the writings are based on Jesus' long speech to his disciples in John 13-17 and the core ideas are light and love. They will reappear in various ways throughout the next few weeks using some strong contrasts.

Harriet, the town gossip, knew everything about everybody. People didn't like the way she talked about them behind their backs, but they were afraid to say anything because they knew they would be her next topic of gossip. But Harriet made a mistake, when she saw George's van parked all afternoon in front of the town's only bar. She commented to George and others in no uncertain manner that since it was parked there so long everyone knew that he must be an alcoholic. George, a man of few words, stared at her for a moment and then just walked away. He said nothing. Later that evening, George quietly parked his van in front of Harriet's house and left it there for the night.

Seeing is believing - or is it? Harriet believed it was and would jump to all kinds of wild conclusions from what she saw. Last week, on Easter day, Lucinda talked about how when we first see something we might need to take a leap of faith to believe how it will end. This week we might want to say that it's the other way round! Thomas thought the other disciples had taken a leap of faith too far in believing what they said they had seen.

Put yourself in Thomas' shoes for a minute. Jesus had died. Thomas had seen it with his own eyes. It wasn't rational to think that he could now be alive. They must have been deluded. Grief affects us all in different ways, as Thomas knew. So he wasn't prepared to take their word for it. He wanted to see the evidence and make up his own mind. So he was adamant: "Unless I see the scars of the nails in his hands and put my finger on those scars and my hand in his side, I will not believe". Did he want to be convinced? What he says sounds pretty negative, doesn't it?

Why wasn't Thomas with the other disciples when Jesus came to them? They were all afraid of the Jews, the gospel reading says - they had locked their doors for protection. Had Thomas thought he would be safer on his own, perhaps at home? Or had he heard what had happened earlier in the day when Mary said she had seen Jesus near the tomb? How had he felt then, when the disciples told him Jesus had come to them in their locked meeting room? Had he been jealous - not wanting to accept it for fear he had missed out on something vital? Was he afraid he would never see Jesus again? "Unless I see ... I won't believe". Was he hostile to the others? Had he stepped away from fellowship with them?

We are not told, and perhaps conjecture doesn't help. What might we have done in the same situation? What should we have done? Does the epistle reading give us an answer?

The first verse of 1 John 1 gives us a direct connection to the gospel reading. The One who was from the beginning - the One who is the Word of Life, the Life, the Eternal Life (vv 1 & 2) - is the very person the disciples had seen, heard - and touched! Whatever the reason for Thomas's absence from that first church meeting, God used it to emphasise that the resurrected Jesus - even though he

could appear and disappear at will - was not a ghost, or a spirit, but had a physical body that could be seen, heard and touched.

Now if John, starting his epistle, was reminiscing about what had happened on that first Easter day, what he goes on to say in verse 3 is very relevant to what happened to Thomas: when Jesus appeared to the other disciples, one of the first things they did was to go and tell Thomas: they “proclaimed to him what they had seen and heard, so that he could have fellowship with them” - because their joy was not complete without him.

Whatever Thomas’s doubts, he was back with the disciples a week later - still fearful, with locked doors, but now in fellowship with them. So when Jesus came to them again Thomas was able not just to touch him but to recognise him - as God himself - in front of all of them. What a change in a week!

In the first chapter of his letter, John makes two very big statements about God: Jesus is Life (remember his claim “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life”) and God is Light. Death could not hold Jesus because he is Life. Darkness cannot overcome God because he is Light. The proclamation of these two things, if we live by them, gives us fellowship with each other and with God. That is what Thomas discovered, when the disciples found him to tell him their good news, and he came back to spend time with them and to meet Jesus as his God.

This incident tells us clearly that seeing, touching, experiencing God in dramatic ways strengthens our faith, confirms our understanding of God, reassures us of the power and love of God. But it is not the basis of our faith. If our faith in God rested only on our experiences then it would be up and down every day, depending on whether our experiences were good or bad. If we depended on our experiences of God to prove his love for us, what would we do when the only evidence we saw around us was sadness, tragedy and death?

The truth is that, as it did for the disciples, there comes a time when our trust in God has to be in spite of the circumstances we are experiencing. We trust even though we can’t see where God is, or what he is doing. In between the time when the disciples first saw Jesus and when he returned to see Thomas, a week elapsed. Where was Jesus during that time, while the disciples were keeping their doors locked out of fear? Would they ever see him again? Had they imagined it? Was Thomas right - it couldn’t have been possible? Faith keeps on trusting in spite of the fact that we can no longer see God’s hand at work. It keeps on believing that God keeps his promises.

In spite of being jailed and having his life threatened, Paul continued to trust God. In spite of being imprisoned in 1943 for his political and Christian opposition to the Nazi regime, Dietrich Bonhoeffer continued to trust God. He became pastor to fellow prisoners, spoke about God’s love and prayed with them. Mother Teresa continued to help the poor and dying of Calcutta. All she saw, day in and day out, was human misery. But she never lost sight of the loving God.

There comes a time when we believe even though there’s no clear evidence that God is near. We trust when we can’t see. That’s what Jesus meant when he said, “How happy are those who believe without seeing me!” Faith trusts that God is true to his word. He never deserts us. His love always burns strongly for us. Even when the circumstances in our life might tempt us to think otherwise, we continue to trust that God is in control.

Perhaps another way to look at Thomas’s encounter with Jesus is to see it as Jesus’ reward to him for his determination to know the truth. He didn’t just give up hope. He insisted on seeing and touching Jesus for himself. Maybe he was thinking of the woman with her bleeding, who forced her way through the crowd to touch Jesus’ robe, and received her healing. Or the men who took the

roof off a house to lower their friend down for Jesus to heal him. Or any number of people in history, from Jacob onwards, who have wrestled with God to demand his blessing.

To touch Jesus means not just to stand at the back, looking from a distance, but to get up close to the action and to experience the blessing of fellowship with him and with each other. Will Jesus let us touch him if we ask?