

St Peter's – a family of Yetis!

April 23, 2017 (Acts 2: 14a, 22-32; John 20:19-end)

We don't know why Thomas wasn't in the room with the other disciples. These events took place only three days after the crucifixion, four evenings since Jesus's arrest when the disciples had scattered and Peter had denied even knowing Jesus. The city was full of Roman soldiers and tensions were running high. Maybe Thomas just wasn't ready to associate with the other disciples yet, even in a locked room. Maybe something had happened on the way which held him up.

Either way, Thomas wanted to see for himself that Jesus was alive. His dreams of rescue by a Messiah had been shattered once. If others were raising their hopes and suggesting that all was not lost, then Thomas wanted some sort of evidence before re-committing to the cause.

It is worth noting that Thomas is not asking for anything more than the other disciples have already experienced. When Mary Magdalene runs to tell the disciples on Easter morning that she has seen Jesus, they do not believe her. Peter runs back to the garden of Gethsemane to see for himself. When Thomas arrives all the other disciples have seen Jesus, so is it so unreasonable of Thomas to expect the same? Often this need to see for himself is portrayed as a weakness focussing on his lack of belief. Instead, I suggest, Thomas finds himself confused by recent events. He really wants to understand, but he can't understand yet. For those familiar with the teaching in Henleaze junior school, Thomas is showing all the characteristics of a Yeti.

We can learn a little about Thomas by looking at other accounts of him in John's Gospel.

- After Jesus has raised Lazarus, he indicates that he intends to return to Judea, an area he has previously been driven from. Thomas retorts, "let us also go that we may die with him."
- Later Jesus tells his disciples that he is going to prepare a place for them in his father's house so that they may be with him. Thomas questions him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going, how can we know the way?"
- The last time we see Thomas is on this occasion in the locked room.

It seems to me that Thomas is a realist. He sees the world as it is and journey's through it accordingly. Yes, he is a bit of a "glass half empty" kind of man, but he is loyal. He is prepared to return to Judea despite the dangers, he just wants to understand the plan, where he is going and what is expected of him. Thomas is an inquirer, he asks questions because he wants to understand. You can see this in Caravaggio's painting *The Incredulity of Thomas*.

The picture shows Thomas examining Jesus's wounds in an almost scientific way. Here is no dithering sceptic, slow to pick up on what the others already know, but an investigator, an examiner looking to satisfy himself of the truth of what others have told him.

And look at Jesus' face as he watches Thomas. This is not the face of a leader, disappointed that once again one of his disciples has missed the point. Jesus looks almost indulgent as he lets Thomas prod and poke

around his wounds. He knows that Thomas needs this, moment to begin to comprehend and he allows him the time and space he requires.

Like Thomas, we may have things we get stuck on, difficult questions about suffering, creation, life after death. Jesus wants to give us the time and opportunity to work them out. But, we need to do the searching. Asking questions is good, but we need to take care in our interpretation of the answers. Unlike in Thomas's time, seeing may not lead directly to belief.

Last week, I was helping my son look for something witty or inspirational to contribute to his school yearbook. Wanting something wise and meaningful I typed into Google, "Abraham Lincoln quotes."

Amongst other things, I found this.

"The problem with quotes on the internet is that no one can confirm their authenticity."

Attributed to Abraham Lincoln, but clearly not spoken by the 19th century American statesman. We know this, because we read the words in the context of our own experience, our knowledge of the world and the reliability of our source.

For Thomas and the disciples, seeing the risen Christ was important, but it was just one step on the journey to understanding the significance of Jesus's resurrection.

A week later the same group are still meeting in secret in a locked room. Despite this knowledge that Jesus is alive very little seems to have changed.

But, several weeks later when we get to the reading from Acts, the disciples behave quite differently. Peter stands up in a crowded square proclaiming to all who will listen, including the authorities who planned Jesus's death, that Jesus is risen and that he is the Messiah. Peter spoke with such authority and conviction, that 3000 people were added to the followers of Christ that day.

What has happened in the weeks between these two events? Whilst we can't know exactly what happened, we can surmise.

We know that the disciples continued to meet in secret praying and praising God. From other accounts of these events we learn that Jesus opened their minds so that they could understand the scriptures, helped perhaps by two of their number, who had discussed the scriptures with the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus.

Jesus appeared on other occasions in the weeks following Easter. The last time, when he ascended into heaven, only a few days before Peter's speech. The disciples must have considered all this in the light of their own understanding and knowledge of the world and the scriptures.

At the Ascension Jesus had told his disciples that they would shortly receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Peter's speech immediately follows that gift and, I suggest it is the Holy Spirit that causes Peter to speak so powerfully to the people gathered in Jerusalem.

Prof David Wilkinson is an astrophysicist and theologian. He said,

“Faith for me is trust on the basis of evidence, which leads to action.”

I think this is the type of faith we see in Peter, Thomas and the other disciples at Pentecost and afterward as they continue to spread the gospel and grow the early church. Yes, they have evidence based on their own experience of the risen Christ. This is backed up by their knowledge of scripture and the world. But God cannot be constrained by human understanding. It is trust in the Holy Spirit that prompts them to action. To rely solely on evidence confines God to our level.

Science can hinder our understanding of God or it can broaden it. Think of Darwin’s theory of evolution. To some this was, and still is, a hurdle too great to reconcile with their understanding of God, to others it opens new areas of thinking about the way God operates through creation. Each person’s response will be influenced by their trust in the Holy Spirit to reveal God’s work to them and their willingness to work with God through the evidence presented.

Like Thomas we must do what we need to do to confirm and strengthen our faith. No question should be too hard or too silly to be asked. No question should be dismissed. I know that I speak for Mark, Iain and my fellow lay ministers in saying we will always try to help if you approach us with a particular difficulty. I understand that there are plans for more structured opportunities to raise challenging questions, so that together we may help each other grow in our faith.

We mustn’t hide behind closed doors, but must go out into the world and look for answers. But we do so trusting in the Holy Spirit to reveal God’s will and prompt us to action.

As I hinted earlier, the children at Henleaze junior school are encouraged to be Yeti’s. Rather than say they can’t do something, or they don’t understand something, they are to say,

“I can’t do this yet.”

“I don’t understand this yet.”

This makes them a yeti. Whether they want to understand maths, music or the meaning of life, all things can be mastered with the right attitude and perseverance.

I think Thomas was a yeti. When he arrived late to the closed room on that first Easter day, his words were not those of a cynical unbeliever, but of someone who really wanted to understand and who wanted to do something about it. We live in the times between Jesus resurrection and his return in glory, sometimes described as the times of now and not yet. There will always be things we don’t understand yet. Some, will not be revealed until Jesus’ return. But even then, just searching can broaden our minds and deepen our faith. So, as you leave here today I encourage you to think of yourself as a little bit taller, a little bit broader and a whole lot hairier! I want us to leave as a family of yetis, persevering and looking for the risen Christ in all the difficult and challenging questions we encounter.