

Sermon for 12th April 2026, Year A, Easter 2

Preached at St Serf's Shettleston

John 20:19-end

Sermon

Last week, on Easter day, we did our best, along with Mary Magdalene, to figure out the mystery of the empty tomb, carefully following the clues, trying to come to some kind of reasonable conclusion about what might have happened.

The human mind always wants to make sense of things – to understand the world and figure it all out. This is why we love mystery dramas so much, and it's also what drives the motivation for scientific discovery and even public debate. We have a strong human need to follow the evidence until the mystery is solved.

Sometimes we are willing to take certain things 'on faith', perhaps because at some deep heart level we yearn for it to be true, but still, the mind wants faith to be shored up by evidence, so the leap of faith is at least a manageable one.

I remember back in the early 90s, when I was at college in Durham, I really wanted to be a Christian mainly because I was lonely and longed to belong to a group that were fundamentally kind to one another. But the problem was that I was an atheist and a mathematician. I needed proofs. My heart desired God, but my mind would not open the door. Eventually I read a book called "In search of God" by David Watson, and it just barely convinced me with enough evidence of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, that I realised that I had successfully made the leap of faith.

Of all the great mysteries of faith – the healing miracles of Jesus, the walking on water, the feeding of the multitudes – the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is

surely the most difficult for us to understand. Everything we know about the world tells us that resurrection is impossible.

The Gospel of John is written entirely with this natural scepticism in mind. In contrast, Mark's Gospel is obsessed with unexplained and unresolved mysteries. Mark's Jesus refuses to explain anything but speaks in parables so that his listeners must listen with the heart, rather than the mind. John, on the other hand, is all about giving evidence to help us believe. "These signs are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."

John understands the modern sceptical mind – it's the same as the ancient sceptical mind. He was writing his gospel as an old man, decades after the fact, and he wrote for an audience none of whom had experienced the resurrection, or indeed any of the miracles first-hand – an audience just like us, in fact.

And so, it is John who gives us the story of Thomas, the one who is not there when Jesus first appears to the disciples, the one who needs proper evidence before he can believe. Thomas is us – the one who has the strongest desire to believe and yet is very frustrated that he can't.

I doubt any of us here are surprised at Thomas' difficulty. The mind can't make a leap of faith based purely on the testimony of other people, even if they are our friends. 'Surely,' we think, 'it's much more likely they are caught up in the emotion of some contagious hysteria, simply imagining something they desperately wish were true.'

Historically, this first Sunday after Easter has been known as 'Low Sunday' – the low-key echo of last week's glorious Easter joy. For some it may feel a bit like showing up at a party after most of the guests have gone home, with those remaining telling you what a wonderful time you have completely missed by coming too late.

Well, we missed Easter too, by two thousand years, and those who first heard John's gospel also missed it by decades. All of us can hear the accounts of Jesus' life and his resurrection, but we were not really there. We did not see it or touch it for ourselves, and so our faith is naturally reserved and cautious, and perhaps just a little grumpy. "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." How dare Jesus fail to give us the evidence he knows we need?

Of course, Jesus *does* give Thomas the evidence he needs. A week later, Thomas is present with the other disciples and Jesus appears to them a second time. Immediately he addresses Thomas. "Put your finger here and see my hands. Do not doubt, but believe." Jesus acknowledges without any criticism or complaint that Thomas – and we – need something more than a second-hand encounter with God. We need to see for ourselves, and Jesus acknowledges this. Touch. See. Believe.

Like many sceptics, when Thomas receives the personal encounter he was craving, his need for dry intellectual evidence goes completely out of the window. Despite all the magnificent art depicting Thomas placing his fingers into Jesus' wounded side, the text doesn't mention him doing that. Instead, he immediately cries out, "My Lord and my God!" – one of the strongest declarations of faith in Jesus as fully divine in the whole of the New Testament.

Often it is the most resistant of doubters who become the most ardent believers when they receive a personal encounter with God. I know this from my own experience. For some years as an atheist unbeliever, I actively attacked Christian faith as ridiculous and immature, something to be thrown off like a childish belief in fairies. But the strength of my resistance to faith was in direct proportion to my desire for it to be true. I just wanted to experience the truth of it for myself, not as some philosophical argument but as Thomas encountered Jesus, in an undeniable personal experience.

Admittedly, John's gospel recognises that even though Thomas has received the experience he longed for, the rest of us will likely not have done. We are still left in the place where Thomas had been. Mary Magdalene saw Jesus, but the disciples didn't believe her. The disciples saw Jesus, but Thomas didn't believe them. Thomas saw Jesus, but now it's our turn to say that, on balance, perhaps we're still not quite sure. And so, Jesus goes on to say, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." It is a particularly fitting blessing for those who have shown up to the Easter celebration a week late, or even two thousand years late.

Jesus always seems to meet people where they are on their faith journey. Like a good doctor, he doesn't give the same prescription to everyone. He approaches us all in different ways because our experiences are different and our approaches to life are different. He finds a way to bless us. Mary Magdalene just needed to hear him speak her name. The disciples needed the comfort of his presence. Thomas needs the evidence of his crucifixion wounds.

According to John, this is always the way that Jesus responds to our doubt. We're told Jesus did many signs not written down in the gospel – why? – because they were for the benefit of others and not for us. But these signs *are* written down, so that we might come to believe and have life in his name."

Most of *us* have come to believe in this way. We have not seen or touched. We weren't at the Resurrection; we only heard about it from someone else. Someone told us the story, and it struck a chord. We wanted it to be true.

But some of us may still need something else, something beyond the telling of a story, something real, an undeniable experience, and this is okay too. God knows what each of us is yearning for. He knows that mere evidence is not enough. The heart needs something deeper. And so, he gives us the Holy Spirit, the experience of the divine within our hearts, and of course the Communion bread and wine, the body and blood of Jesus so that we too can touch and believe.