

## Faith's Rising Tide

### The Doubt before the knowing

On our journey through life, like rising and falling of the tides, belief and doubt are our constant companions. Never get so certain of our walk with God that there are never moments of perplexity. But nor are we ever so bereft of God's presence that we give up our seeking. The philosopher Descartes said "If you would be a real seeker after truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things." (Principles of Philosophy. p\_\_\_).

We are all natural-born doubting-Thomases. It's in a child's eyes before he can speak, and when he does one of his first words is always "No." Doubt is an inevitable part of our existence and not something to be avoided. We must face up to it. It is a part of our humanity – the way God created us. Doubt is essential to us because *doubt is the prelude to knowledge*, the *low tide* that leaves us helpless, high and dry, stuck in the mud until the water begins to rise again and washing up at our feet all new reasons to believe.

So put yourself in the shoes of the disciples on the evening of the first Easter day. Never had the tide of faith been so low. Never before had all hope been washed so far out to sea. But then come reports of an empty tomb. And into the deepest cracks of their doubting hearts begins to trickle a tiny stream of *hope*. Could it be *true* what they're saying? Could Jesus really be alive again? And then. . .

### The incomprehensible arrival

It had been such a nice story for a few short years: the kingdom of God coming in and through Jesus, a common man with a new deal for the common man, a new world order in which *they* the followers of Jesus the Messiah would throw off the yoke of Gentile rule and also that of their own corrupt Jewish leaders. They would reign with the Messiah! But now, with the proven ability of the Jewish leaders to bring about a Roman crucifixion, the tide has gone out for them. They had gambled and lost. He's left them high and dry. They had defied those in power and now they are sure the Jewish leaders are moving in for the kill. So "on the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for *fear of the Jewish leaders* . . . "

But then, "Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" The Lord reveals himself in a mode beyond anything they could have imagine! Through the walls, through a locked door. . . It's so amazing that they needed some form of . . .

### Positive Identification

So "he showed them his hands and side". The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord." Because these wounds proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that it is *he himself* who was crucified who now stands before them. For he had promised, "I will not leave you orphaned. I will not leave you high and dry. I am coming to you." (14:18) and now that promise has been kept. The risen Jesus stands in their midst. So now what? Jesus wastes no time. It is no time for tearful apologies or jumping up and down and dancing. He announces that they are to be part of his . . .

### Ongoing mission

"Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent *me*, I am sending *you*."  
Before any of this happened, he had declared that " whoever receives the one I send

receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.” (13:20) The disciples are more than representatives, they are the embodiment of God’s love, the hands feet, eyes, ears and mouth of God in the world. And now, with these words of Jesus, that dynamic becomes powerfully operative in these men and women. The God the Father has sent, and obviously continuing to send, God the Son into the world. And although the *mode* of Jesus’ presence in the world is about to change from a personal one into an embodiment in the church, Jesus’ mission in the world would continue just as it had before. The apostles are being commissioned to carry on the exact same work Jesus had begun. So how’s that going to work? The risen Lord does not hand over the mission to his disciples and just leave them to it. No. He gives them . . .

### **A spiritual empowerment**

“And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit.”

Just like the Son of God, sent by God the Father, the disciples are being sent into the world with a revelation of God’s redemption for the world. The Spirit comes as a rising tide empowering them to accomplish their mission. That is the primary reason the Spirit is given. And the implications are global if we consider the symbolism of his “breathing” on them.

“In the beginning”, the Bible says, God *breathed the breathe of life* into our nostrils and we became human beings. But then we sinned, the tide went out on our spiritual life. Humanity lost it’s spiritual connection with God. O we remained human beings, made in God’s image, but the vital spiritual union with the God was lost. So just as the implications of this loss were global, affecting all humanity, so too are the implications global as Jesus breathes the breathe of life into his disciples. A new spiritual tide had begun to come in and would one day fill the whole earth.

When Jesus, God’s Son, was “conceived of the Holy Spirit,” a new creation began. The Bible says that “if anyone is *in Christ*, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away, see, everything has become new. (2 Cor 5:17).

The risen Christ *breathes* on his disciples giving birth to a whole *new humanity*. By receiving the Holy Spirit, they will now live “in Christ,” “in the Spirit.” They are now incorporated into the new creation that began when Jesus was “conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried, descended into hades, and on the third day rose from the dead”.

It is now the third day. The risen Christ stands in their midst, declares the peace of God, breathes on them the Spirit and with this comes . . .

### **Kingdom authority**

“If you forgive the sins of anyone, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

In a court of law, the judge declares a prisoner’s guilt or innocence. Accordingly, they are either bound in chains and led away to be punished or set free to live their life. But Jesus, in making this statement on forgiveness, is not making us the judges over other people. He is simply sending us with the Good News that sin can be forgiven because he died and rose again. And according to the *response* to this message, men and women will either be set free from the tyranny of the powers of this world, released into the freedom of the God’s kingdom or continue to be enslaved to the principles and powers that rule the world which can show no grace and have no power to forgive. A rejection of the good news of forgiveness of sins that is given to us by the risen Jesus will lead inevitably to a negative judgement on those who reject it.

It sounds harsh, doesn't it? But kingdom authority is never easy to understand, even harder to exercise and not always welcome in a pluralistic society as our own. The idea of kingdom authority is most troubling when we consider our mission to the world. But these words are directed just as much us as the community of believers. We, too, stand in constant need of forgiveness and correction.

And yet what an astounding reality: in the power of the Holy Spirit, we can truly forgive and truly be forgiven. Nothing on earth can ever stop the rising tide of kingdom authority. It is God's Gospel invasion into the territory once claimed by the darkest powers of this world. God's love and forgiveness finds where we're stuck in the mud, high and dry and lifts us on the tide and washes us clean. We have peace with God through Jesus Christ. Sometimes that tide will come to us as a raging torrent. It will catch us off guard, sweeps us away in a rolling surf. Other times, it comes in slowly, silently in the night in tiny trickles but just as unstoppable it rises until we float free from where we had been hopelessly marooned. We are lifted on faith's rising tide.

Which is really the theme of this story. It is now. . .

### **One week later.**

Thomas was just as loyal to Jesus as anyone else. He was not a betrayer or denier, he just *wasn't there* to see Jesus when the others did. His doubting doesn't devalue him in any way. Not is Jesus' appearing to him a week later some sort of concession to his weakness but a timely revelation of God's eternal salvation that would set Thomas free. It is one week after Easter morning, the eighth day, the Lord's Day. Thomas met Jesus on that day of the week Christians now claim our day of worship. That is no coincidence. Every Sunday is Easter, a remembrance of the day Jesus rose from the dead. (Now, let's be clear, what actual day of the week it was is not the issue; but typically, every seven days we human beings need a day of rest to reconnect with God, recharge our spiritual batteries and receive afresh the Word of God.

John began this Gospel by saying, "The Word was with God and the Word was God . . . and the Word became flesh." 2,000 years later we have become so accustomed to hearing this that it can cease to have the same impact it must of had on Thomas and the others that first Lord's Day after he rose from the dead and stood among them in a transformed physical body.

But that *day* was the beginning of humanity *knowing God* a whole new way – through the Body of Christ. After all human efforts to knowing God had been all washed up. After all attempts at religion had left men of all nations high and dry. After the tide of hope and love had gone out on the world, God became flesh and blood, lived and died among us that we might become *his Body* on earth.

It seems in our day we live at the highest tide of unbelief. Skepticism about God and especially the Christian Gospel is a strong current in our society. There is much around us to feed our doubt and fear. We, can be so slow to comprehend, beside the fact that we are all natural born doubting Thomases. Yet we still can come together once a week as the Body of Christ so that our corporate spirituality has a kind of rhythm, a seven day pulse so that Jesus can come to us as he did "though the doors be locked, and stand among us again as we Christians say to each other "The Peace of the Lord be with you!"

And in the receiving of that peace and assurance in his heart, we can be reasonable sure that Thomas . . .

### **Declined the offer to touch the wounds . . .**

“Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

There are lots of famous paintings showing Thomas actually touching Jesus' wounds, but I don't think he ever did. Yes, we too must recognize that those wounds. Jesus really suffered and died for us. But Thomas would not saved be saved by touching Jesus nor by seeing him but . . .

### **By faith**

“Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

This is not an abstract theological definition of who Jesus is. This is a personal commitment to him. There is a revelation to Thomas in his heart. Jesus has taken his place at the right hand of God through his death and resurrection and ascension. He is MY Lord, and MY God. Thomas is now included in the redemption of humanity that Jesus has brought about at the cross. This wonderful encounter between Jesus and Thomas really defines. . .

### **True faith**

“ Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Are we saved because we've seen something? No. Are we saved because we've read some words on a page or heard them preached? No. Are we saved because we've been swept away by a flood of joyful feelings of forgiveness and love? No! These are things are certainly part of our experience as we encounter the risen Christ by His Spirit.

But the scene with Jesus and Thomas clearly defines for us what faith really is. Yes, we must place our trust in Jesus, so it is in one way our own individual *choice*. But on the other hand, the faith that now flooded into Thomas' heart came from a revelation of God's faithful act on his behalf in the cross of Jesus Christ. The tide has risen, and Thomas must ride it.

So Jesus takes the focus off Thomas' personal response to him and on to “those who have *not seen*”. They will not have the privilege of seeing Jesus alive from the dead, of seeing and touching his wounds, of having their faith confirmed by some extraordinary event like Jesus appearing through the walls of a locked room. Nonetheless, *theirs* will be *a true and blessed faith*, called forth by the witness of these disciples to these things they have seen. Without seeing, others will simply trust in the faithful death of Jesus as God's solution for what went wrong with us. . .

Nevertheless, (and now it is not Jesus but the narrator who speaks) there were some amazing things done by Jesus, and what John's Gospel records are only a few . . .

### **Selected signs**

“Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book.”

In John's Gospel, we hold in our hands an very cleverly crafted document. It records some very specific “signs”: Jesus turning water into wine, Jesus healing the son of a Gentile official and so on. The greatest and most dramatic of these signs, of course, was Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. But all theses plus his *resurrection appearances* and, in this immediate story, his appearance to Thomas, were only a very few of a great body of Jesus' signs in both

written and oral material that the early Christians knew about. But the Holy Spirit guided the apostles in their choice of these few which are included in the Gospel in order to focus our minds specifically on . . .

### **Eternal salvation**

“ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

As we read these things, something happens. It's something we really have no more control over than we do the ocean tides. It encroaches on the territory of our unbelief. Inundates the sand, rises further up the beach with each wave.

We're high and dry and one moment, then we feel the waters lapping at our boat. Then we are afloat. And we rise. But we are still anchored. See, each boat is moored to a large concrete ball, it will go nowhere now matter how high the tide may rise until the mooring is loosed.

When we read these things about Jesus, when the Spirit impresses their truth on our hearts, we rise on the Spirit's tide. We become participants in the new life of the new creation as we loose our moorings and set sail. So faith is not an act of human will. It is the act of God which sets our will free to ride the tide of God's act in the cross of Jesus Christ.

If we come back to the time when these words were still fresh ink on the apostle's scroll, we can discover again how powerful this Gospel of John is as a witness to us. Often it is said, if one doesn't know where to begin with the Bible, then begin with the Gospel of John.

Jesus is the Son of God in an absolute sense, is the king of saving sovereignty who belongs to the new creation.

The tide of that new creation is rising.

Enter it and “have life in his name.”