

## Sermon 8 April 2018

**John 20:19-31** 'Doubting Thomas'

Thomas was not with the disciples when Jesus first appeared to them, and when they tell him about Jesus appearing to them, his response is, 'I won't believe until I have seen and touched the scars of the nails in his hands and the spear in his side.' I believe Thomas speaks for so many of us. He wants tangible proof, and without that tangible proof he is reluctant to believe.

Of course, that's what faith is, believing in something you cannot prove. It can be very difficult. Faith is a lot like life. It too has mountain-top moments and valley moments. The nature of faith is such that no matter how faithfully we live the word of God, there will be times when our faith will be like the faith of Thomas in today's gospel reading. It will seem to flicker and threaten to go out on us.

Faith is a lot like the sun. Sometimes it is big and bright and clearly visible in the sky. At other times we can't even see it. It has disappeared behind a layer of clouds and seems to have vanished from the sky. We know from experience, however, that the sun is always somewhere in the sky. It's just that we can't see it all the time. So faith is born out of experience, and I will come back to that in a moment.

Just a brief comment on Thomas. There is no doubting his love for Jesus. He was devastated by the death of Jesus. We are not sure why he wasn't with the rest of the disciples when Jesus appeared to them. Perhaps he was doing the grocery shopping, but more likely he was dealing with his grief on his own. He was an independent character. Independence is fine but we do need others for our succour and support. We cannot either receive or give love in a vacuum, and, to paraphrase Paul in 1 Corinthians 13, without love we are nothing.

Part of Thomas's independence was that he needed to see for himself; he needed to actually experience the scars of Jesus before he would believe. That is quite human. I think many of us would relate to that. I think many of us could attribute our faith to an experience, or more probably a number of experiences, either of a dramatic nature or not so dramatic nature. I want to share with you a true story of our faith was born out of quite a dramatic experience.

One of the most remarkable stories to come out of the Second World War is the story of a US Air Force plane that crashed in the Pacific. On board were Captain Eddie Rickenbacker, the famous World War 1 fighter pilot, Lt James Whittaker, and a crew of six others.

All eight survived the crash. For the next 21 days they floated in three tiny rubber rafts without food or water. Their only source of strength was a daily prayer service. It consisted of reading from a pocket Bible and praying to God. Lt Whittaker was the only atheist in the group, but not for long.

On the sixth day the men were growing weak and needed food and water badly. After their evening prayer service, they fired off a flare, hoping it would attract the attention of a ship or plane. But the flare was faulty and fell among the rafts. As it did, it attracted a school of fish. In their excitement, two fish jumped into one of the rafts. The men had their first food in a week.

The next afternoon the men prayed for water. Shortly after, they were deluged by a rain storm. From that point on, Whittaker became a believer.

On the tenth day something special happened. After their prayer service, the men confessed their sins aloud. It was a beautiful display of faith and humility in the presence of God and one another.

On the 13<sup>th</sup> day another remarkable thing happened. A heavy shower of rain passed by, missing the men by some distance. For the first time, Whittaker led the others in prayer. He prayed the rain would return. What happened then he describes in a book he later wrote about the experience.

'There are some things that can't be explained by natural law. The wind did not change, but the receding curtain of rain began to move slowly towards us against the wind. We drank and caught a store of water.'

On the 21<sup>st</sup> day they spotted land. Lt Whittaker manned the oars of his raft. Seven and a half hours later they reached land. As soon as they landed, they knelt down and gave thanks to God.

When Lt Whittaker returned home he wrote a best-selling book about the experience. He also toured the country, sharing his faith with live audiences. The man who had started out as an unbeliever became the most ardent believer of all.

Whittaker was very much like Thomas. When he saw the tangible evidence, he no longer doubted. I just love that verse from our gospel reading where Jesus says to Thomas, 'You believe because you have seen me. Happy are those who haven't seen me and believe anyway.' No verse in the Bible could speak more directly and emphatically to us today than that verse. I am quite sure that Jesus had us in mind when he spoke those words.

To conclude, just as it was faith that gave Lt Whittaker and his fellow men the strength to keep going when their prospects looked bleak, and just as it was faith that gave Thomas and his fellow disciples the strength to go forth and be missionaries for Jesus Christ against formidable odds, so it is faith that sustains us when life throws up its inevitable challenges.

Let me finish with a wonderful verse from Psalm 16, 'I know the Lord is always with me. I will not be shaken, for he is right beside me.'