

ON THE NECESSITY OF DOUBT¹

**A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in
St James' Church, King Street, Sydney,
on the Second Sunday of Easter, 8 April 2018**

I had this sermon written by Palm Sunday. I knew that Holy Week would be busy and I wanted to give myself space to listen to Mother Emma Percy without thinking about what I had to do today. Imagine my dismay, shock, horror even, when, in her sermon at 9.00 and 11.00 on Easter Day, she began with the very quotation that I had planned for this morning. What was I to do? Must I now reshape everything? This was not the time for the fainthearted. I determined to go ahead as planned. I will even now give you a little more of the quotation than Mother Emma did.

‘Only it is so *very* lonely here!’ Alice said in a melancholy voice; and at the thought of her loneliness two large tears came rolling down her cheeks.

‘Oh, don’t go on like that!’ cried the poor Queen, wringing her hands in despair. ‘Consider what a great girl you are. Consider what a long way you’ve come to-day. Consider what o’clock it is. Consider anything, only don’t cry!’

Alice could not help laughing at this, even in the midst of her tears. ‘Can *you* keep from crying by considering things?’ she asked.

‘That’s the way it’s done,’ the Queen said with great decision: ‘nobody can do two things at once, you know. Let’s consider your age to begin with—how old are you?’

‘I’m seven and a half exactly.’

‘You needn’t say “exactly,”’ the Queen remarked: ‘I can believe it without that. Now I’ll give *you* something to believe. I’m just one hundred and one, five months and a day.’

‘I can’t believe *that*!’ said Alice.

‘Can’t you?’ the Queen said in a pitying tone. ‘Try again: draw a long breath, and shut your eyes.’

Alice laughed. ‘There’s no use trying,’ she said: ‘one *can*’t believe impossible things.’

‘I daresay you haven’t had much practice,’ said the Queen. ‘When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.’²

¹ Readings: Acts 4:32-37; Psalm 133; 1 John 1:1-2:2; John 20:19-31

² Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, Chapter 5,
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12/12-h/12-h.htm#link2HCH0005>

In the past, the Second Sunday of Easter was known as “Low Sunday”. The term was intended not to denigrate the day but to draw a contrast between it and the great festivities of the Sunday before, Easter Day: the Easter Vigil, the new fire, the great outburst of the Gloria, silenced since Ash Wednesday, the end of the Lenten fasts, a church full of flowers. We haven’t forgotten Easter but the grand ceremonies are over.

To regard this Sunday as inferior would be to underestimate its importance. Great events are often followed by what psychologists call “post-adrenaline blues”.³ I well remember such experiences after youth camps in my teens. A biblical example may be the aftermath of the Transfiguration. All three synoptic gospels tell how, when Jesus, Peter, James and John came down from the mountain, they were confronted with the usual crowds.⁴ The let-down is reflected in J Armitage Robinson’s hymn, “’Tis good, Lord, to be here”, the final verse of which runs:

5 ’Tis good, Lord, to be here,
yet we may not remain;
but since thou bidst us leave the mount,
come with us to the plain.⁵

Today is important because our gospel reading tells us how the disciples reacted to the events of the first Easter weekend. They were bewildered, depressed and afraid. They locked themselves away. Then Jesus was there. John creates a deliberate ambiguity about him. He seems to be there physically, but he has come through the locked doors. He is the same, but different. The next Sunday, that is this Sunday, they were there again. Who knows how they spent that week? Still afraid? Still depressed? Locked in their individual residences?

Then it happened again. Except, this time, Thomas turned up. He had not been there the previous week and was somewhat sceptical about what he had heard. What, exactly, is Thomas’s problem? The first cab off the rank is that he doesn’t believe in resurrection itself. Hardly surprising. The ancients were not gullible. They knew that people usually did not rise from the dead. Why should he not be sceptical? The next possibility is that he didn’t believe that it was Jesus. Thus, the demand to observe his wounds. Finally, he may have doubted that God would raise someone who had been crucified, given that this was a humiliating death and one that went contrary to the disciples’ original understanding of God’s triumphant kingdom. This time the ambiguity of the same but different is heightened because Jesus asks Thomas to touch him. It’s not clear whether or

³ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/growing-friendships/201409/post-adrenaline-blues>

⁴ Matthew 17:9 ff, Mark 9:9 ff, Luke 9:37 ff

⁵ *New English Hymnal*, No. 178

not Thomas actually does touch Jesus. Perhaps it doesn't matter because Thomas expresses himself as satisfied.

Mostly, I can easily imagine many of the scenes portrayed in the gospels but there are some that stump me. I can understand the text of the description of the Transfiguration. My English is sufficiently good and my understanding adequate. What I can't grasp is what the Transfiguration would have been like to experience. I have the same problem with today's gospel of the same but different Jesus. The text is fine, the event a mystery. That's a pity because, without this event and some others like it, we would not be here. We cannot overestimate the strength of the perception in the earliest church that Jesus was alive.

My problem is the reason why today's gospel is in the form it is. This reading has very little to do with Thomas. It certainly is not intended to denigrate him or to hold him up to ridicule as the now legendary "Doubting Thomas". The point of the reading is found in the response that Jesus makes to Thomas's declaration:

Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'⁶

This text is about me; it is about all of us. We fit the description perfectly. None of us have seen. We, more than Thomas, are also set to doubt; and we must. In 2014, journalist, Julia Baird, wrote an article for the *New York Times* in which she commented on a statement made by Archbishop Justin Welby of Canterbury that, at times, he questioned if God was really there.⁷ She noted that the public reaction to his statement was "predictably juvenile". Atheists rejoicing everywhere, thinking that to doubt was to deny. But, Baird wrote:

Faith cannot block out darkness, or doubt. When on the cross, Jesus did not cry out "Here I come!" but "My God, why have you forsaken me?" His disciples brimmed with doubts and misgivings. ...

If we don't accept both the commonality and importance of doubt, we don't allow for the possibility of mistakes or misjudgements. While certainty frequently calcifies into rigidity, intolerance and self-righteousness, doubt can deepen, clarify and explain.

Pope Francis has echoed these sentiments. In his general audience on 23 November 2016, he addressed his own doubts as well as recognising those of others. He said;

We do not need to be afraid of questions and doubts because they are the beginning of a path of knowledge and going deeper; one who does not ask questions cannot progress either in knowledge or in faith.⁸

⁶ John 20: 29

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/26/opinion/julia-baird-doubt-as-a-sign-of-faith.html>

⁸ <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2016/11/23/pope-francis-says-doubt-key-life-faith/>

Rowan Williams, commenting on this morning's gospel reading, noted the importance of the community of faith in supporting us in both our doubt and our belief. He said:

... what Thomas is being invited to believe in—and we in turn, without the tangible assurance given to him—is still *the riseness of the crucified Jesus*, and his renewed material contact with his friends. Thomas' failure is not in misunderstanding the nature of resurrection but in demanding a special, individual assurance of it: he wants a proof other than the testimony of the group of believers.⁹

On the other hand, our community may also fetter our capacity to doubt and to believe. We have a long history. Our doctrinal living rooms are cluttered with too much furniture. Outdated social and cultural baggage masquerading as fundamental beliefs destroys our confidence and creates conflicts where there should be none. The Welsh poet-priest, R S Thomas, puts it succinctly:

We have over-furnished
our faith. Our churches
are as limousines in the procession
towards heaven.¹⁰

The Queen is wrong. Belief is not a matter of practice, of trying harder or more frequently. Neither is it a matter of boasting about how much we believe and about what. The Christian faith is not about believing six impossible things before breakfast. Indeed, the Christian faith is not essentially even the sum of all those impossible things, as though they were items to be ticked off on a list in the Christian application form.

It is about belonging to a community enlivened by the presence of the living Christ. Theologian Ben Myers, notes that:

[T]he resurrection brings forth new social patterns: forgiveness, peacemaking, patience, truth-telling. ... The resurrection is thus God's unequivocal "Yes" to all the diverse bits of humanity—it is God's commitment to a reconciled world.¹¹

That we are here again after the adrenalin high of Easter Day makes us part of that new vision, a part of that renewed community. We become those who have not seen and yet believe. We do so because nothing else accounts for our experience.

⁹ Rowan Williams, *Resurrection*, Harrisburg PA, Morehouse Publishing, 1994, p. 103. James Martin, SJ, notes that "Between the time Mary Magdalene met the risen Christ and when she announced his Resurrection to the disciples, Mary Magdalene was the church on earth, for only to her had been revealed the Paschal Mystery. Any discussion of women in the church begins with this."

<https://www.facebook.com/tegregory/posts/10104708891046469> No women, no church; no church no resurrection.

¹⁰ <https://doubtbeliefrstthomas.wordpress.com/2014/04/20/r-s-thomas-a-poet-for-a-doubting-believers-easter/>

¹¹ <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2013/03/27/3724894.htm>