

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF DOUBT¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Second Sunday of Easter, 27 April 2025

Any lay preacher can tell you the three days in the year when they are most likely to be rostered. They are the Sunday after Christmas, Trinity Sunday and today, the Second Sunday of Easter. Leaving the others aside, I am always pleased to preach on this Sunday because it allows me to discuss doubt positively. It's been three years since my last time, and when I look over the sermons that I have preached on this Sunday over the years, I have, one way or another, said almost the same thing every time. I don't propose to change course in 2025.

I am in good company. The late Pope Francis, whose death we remember today, said, in 2021:

... don't be afraid of doubts, because they are not a sign of the lack of faith. Don't be afraid of doubts. On the contrary, doubts are "vitamins of faith": they help strengthen faith and make it more robust. They enable faith to grow, to become more conscious, free and mature. They make it more eager to set out, to persevere with humility, day after day.²

St Thomas gets a hard time, being loaded with a nickname that implies some error or weakness. On the contrary, Thomas represents most of us at one time or another in our lives. If we sought to emulate an apostle, we could do worse than choose Thomas.

His story is apparently simple enough. For some unexplained reason, Thomas is not present when Jesus first appears to his disciples after his resurrection. He expresses doubt when his colleagues tell him what happened. 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 did not usually rise from the dead. Why should he not be sceptical? However, Thomas is not a positivist philosopher,³ or a scientific atheist like Professor Richard Dawkins.⁴ If he doubted resurrection itself, he would most probably have been influenced by the Sadducees, who did not believe in an afterlife or resurrection.⁵ In any case, he was an ordinary man of his time, who knew what everyone knew.

There can be few people today for whom the resurrection of Jesus is not a problem. At the centre of our faith is an alleged event that we cannot explain and for which the world in which we live has no place. It is not that credulity has disappeared as a phenomenon of modern times. On the contrary, there is much pseudo-science around. Not only that, but conspiracy theories have also lowered the acceptance of science in favour of who knows what. Nevertheless, Thomas is more like us than we may be willing to accept.

The next possibility is that he didn't believe that it was Jesus. Perhaps there was an impostor, for some reason impersonating a risen Jesus. Thus, the demand to observe his wounds.⁶ Nevertheless, although claims of an impostor were in fact made by others, an insider would know that none of the disciples could erect such a scam.

¹ Readings: Acts 5:27-32; Psalm 118:14-29; Revelation 1:4-8; John 20:19-31

² [Pope Francis: Don't Be Afraid of Doubts – Millennial](#)

³ [Positivism - Wikipedia](#)

⁴ [Richard Dawkins - Wikipedia](#)

⁵ Matthew 22:23-33; Mark 12:18-27; Luke 20:27-40 [Sadducees - Wikipedia](#)

⁶ [Investigating Easter: Were the Disciples Fooled By An Imposter? | Cold Case Christianity](#)

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. He may have thought that such a death proved that Jesus could not be the Messiah. After all, John records Jesus being questioned on exactly this point. "We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever".⁷

In the long run it doesn't matter because Thomas ultimately expresses himself as satisfied, possibly on all three counts. But why was Thomas satisfied?

Clearly, it wasn't the empty tomb. We can get a clue to what was happening with the tomb if we begin with Mary Magdalene in the garden on Easter morning. She went to the tomb early and found the stone rolled away. After running and bringing Peter and the disciple Jesus loved, she remained alone when they had left. The empty tomb was only a problem: where was the body? Jesus appeared but she did not recognise him, supposing him to be the gardener. She asked whether he knew about the body. Jesus called her by name, and she recognised him. It was not the tomb; it was being called by name and experiencing the risen Jesus.⁸

The same thing happened to Thomas. What convinced him was the experience of the risen Christ. As Rowan Williams has said:

We can't set up the hidden video camera in the garden on Easter eve and find out what really happened. What we have instead is the impact of an event that caused people to believe that the world had changed for ever, and that Jesus did not belong to the past. ... whatever the exact nature of the event, it had the power to produce the belief that the world had changed for ever.⁹

The best testimony to the resurrection is not any philosophical or empirical conclusion about an historical event. The best evidence is the experience of the disciples and the community that the resurrection brought about.

That is, the experience of the risen Jesus had two steps. Mary and Thomas are examples of that first step. The new church was the second step. We could not imagine that the disciples, having had their experience of the risen Jesus, congratulated each other, said how great it had been, and then returned to their former lives, acting as though everything was still the same.

In the first of a 2025 Lenten series in the English Catholic journal, *The Tablet*, Paul Stubbings referred to a 1965 book by theologian Harry Williams, *The True Wilderness*. He says that, in this book, Harry Williams takes us back to Maundy Thursday in the Garden of Gethsemane. Here he portrays Jesus "as a man who had every reason to believe that he had failed, inescapably confronted with his own doubts." Harry Williams says that Jesus found himself alone:

There was nobody to share His desperate uncertainty, the torturing doubts, the terrifying emptiness, the menace from outside of his approaching arrest and execution, and the infinitely worse menace from inside of disillusion and despair.¹⁰

⁷ John 12:34

⁸ John 20:11-18

⁹ Rowan Williams, *God with Us: The Meaning of the Cross and Resurrection—Then and Now*, London, SPCK, 2017 pp. 66-67

¹⁰ H A Williams, "Gethsemane" in *The True Wilderness*, 1965, p. 46, Williams shared such doubts, see: [C.H. Sisson · Priests' Lib](#) and [Harry Williams | Religion | The Guardian](#)

Doubt, you see, has impeccable credentials. Doubt marked the way to the cross. The reference to Gethsemane alerts us to the reality that doubt is not just an intellectual question. It raises ultimate existential issues: who am I? Who will I be if I believe or don't believe?

Returning to Thomas, Rowan Williams identifies his problem in a new way:

... what Thomas is being invited to believe in ... is *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.

Writing in *The Guardian* last Monday, Justine Toh of the Centre for Public Christianity, commented on having found a chatbot offering divine love on demand. It seems that this is a Jesus chatbot. She said:

It took three minutes with the bot to realise this was my version of hell – and I'm a Christian. AI assistants, at my beck and call, reflect me back at me; the last thing I need is a God bot to do the same.¹¹

Toh concludes that what a virtual contact lacks is the physicality that the Easter story offers us. There is a real Last Supper, a real arrest, a real crucifixion, a real body offered for us and a real experience of resurrection.

Which is why, (she says) talk of resurrection is such a bold move. The early Christians claimed Jesus rose bodily, not spiritually, from the dead. If true, it's the ultimate guarantee that the real world shifted on its axis that first Easter. The body, both now and forevermore, is the really real. Something solid to grip on to in a virtual age when it seems surplus to requirements.

The reality is that we live in the contemporary world, a world that gives little or no support to religious belief of any kind. It is organised in such a way that unbelief is the default position. Thus, it is easy to live without faith, as most of our fellows do. I describe the distance between faith and unbelief as "paper thin". The barrier between them is easily broken making it all the more important to live within a believing community.

As Tom Wright points out, at the end of today's gospel, Jesus offers a faint rebuke to Thomas for his doubts and then turns his attention to us.¹² We are those who have not seen and who yet believe. The question is then whether we can share Thomas's experience. The doubt bit is relatively easy and a necessary first step. The recognition of the risen Christ is much harder. But we can share that too. This community is the Body of Christ. As I have mentioned on other occasions, the Episcopal Church of the USA sometimes uses an invitation to Communion in these words: "Behold what you are!" To which we all reply, "May we become what we receive!"

¹¹ [Can a Jesus chatbot replace the real thing? The Easter story suggests not | Justine Toh | The Guardian](#)

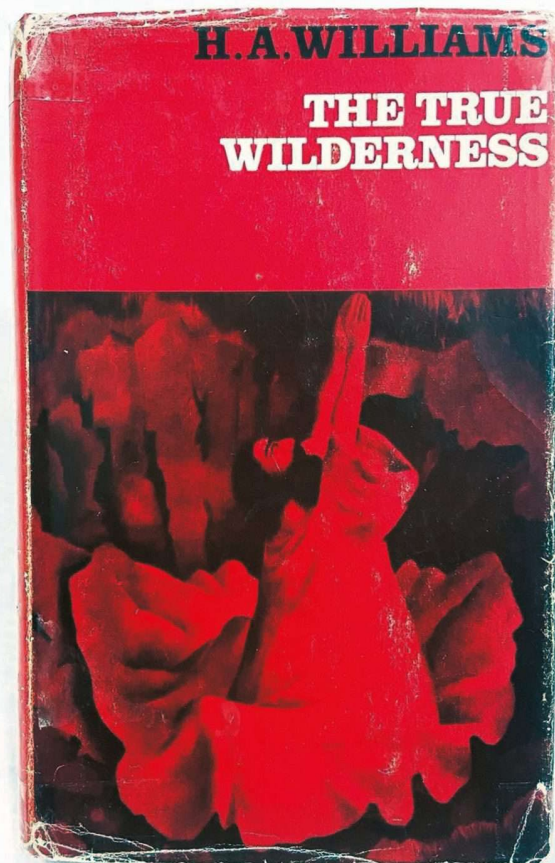
¹² Tom Wright, *John for Everyone Part 2: Chapters 11-21* (New Testament for Everyone), London, SPCK, pp. 152-153



St Thomas
James Tissot
Brooklyn Museum

Paul Stubbings

27 February 2025, The Tablet



In the first of a Lenten series, the headmaster of Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School in west London recommends a book in which Christ confronts his own doubts

When I was a child, as someone once put it, I used to think like a child, and only ever thought of prophets as glorified fortune tellers: amazing predictors of the future – the sort of individuals who got the Incarnation right a few centuries in advance of the fact. How amazing, I used to think, that they could see forward in time like that.

But then I became a man and the realisation hit me that prophets don't see into the future at all: they see into the present. They wrench, pull or peel back, depending on their character, the veil of reality and show us not how things really are constituted beneath the surface, but the true constitution of the surface itself. They don't show us different things; they show us the same things through a different lens. For me, that realisation came when I read H.A. Williams' *The True Wilderness* when I was 40 or so. The experience was, to use an overworked term accurately for once, life-changing.

Harry Williams was an Anglican clergyman, a fellow and dean of Trinity College, Cambridge. A brilliant theologian, he passed through some sort of profound personal crisis, into which he entered broken, and from which he emerged remade. *The True Wilderness* is a collection of sermons given at Trinity after this episode, which show that such breaking of our rose-tinted view of ourselves – by which he means honest and unflinching entry into the wilderness of our deepest nature, nose to nose with all our fears, doubts, weakness and contradictions – is a -critical precursor to the remaking. If Christianity is restricted to the merely theological, if it is regarded solely as a series of intellectual propositions and stops at that level, then Williams' contention is that it is useless. As he himself puts it, "Christian truth ... must be in the blood as

well as the brain. If it is only in the brain, it is without life and powerless to save, as much a parody of itself as Mr Gradgrind's definition of a horse. Nobody denies that a horse is a quadruped, graminivorous, with 40 teeth, and the rest. But the description not only conveys nothing of the living animal, but gives the impression that horses are the invention of pedants. So it is, I believe, with those accounts of the Christian faith served up solely by the brain for the brain."

Harry Williams helped me to see – wrenched me into the realisation would be a better way to put it – that the reason I found it hard to pray (I think we all do, most of the time), was that, for me, prayer all too often degenerates into some sort of cranial exercise in which I am essentially talking to myself. (Thank God that the Spirit stands by us in our weakness and intercedes for us!) The key moment for me was his exegesis of Christ in Gethsemane. I had always thought of the Agony in the Garden, complete with capital letters, as in some sense majestic and removed. Williams described Christ as anything but, as a man who had every reason to believe that he had failed, inescapably confronted with his own doubts. Williams puts it like this: "Perhaps from the start he had been the victim of an illusion. After all, that sort of thing had occurred fairly frequently in the history of his people. They had always had their false prophets as well as their true ones. And many of the false prophets had been sincere enough according to their lights. They had just been a bit mad, that was all. Had he been a bit mad too? And was the defection of Judas the moment of disillusioning sanity? Had he sacrificed everything to a fanatic's dream? After all, his relatives had thought him mad and had once tried to force him home. Such torturing doubts must come to any man who refuses to play safe, to accept what he is told, and can they fail to have been part of Christ's agony and bloody sweat, seeing that he died with that most dreadful of all questions on his lips, 'My God, why hast thou forsaken me?'"

This is heady stuff. Nothing I had ever come across had made Christ's humanity so compellingly clear. And by better appreciating Christ's humanity as a fellow human being, I became more able to gain an insight into the triumph of the sacrifice itself. Williams points out again and again throughout the book that this sort of pain, doubt and isolation is actually intrinsic to our humanity and so we need to embrace such feelings rather than try to will them away, as we spend so much of our time doing. Only by so doing can we meet Christ himself as opposed to a fictive version of him. And it is in that encounter that we too can, and will, be raised up (let it not be forgotten that Williams also wrote *True Resurrection*). Harry Williams helped me to pray because, like the prophet he was, he pointed out not only how I was seeking to save my life, but also, and better, how I might lose it.