

Sermon for 12th April 2026 – Doubting Thomas

GOSPEL: John 20.19-31

Hear the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to John.

Alleluia...

When it was evening on the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, '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.'

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' 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.'

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these 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.

This is the gospel of the Lord. **Alleluia...**

Whilst thinking about today's Gospel reading, the story of Doubting Thomas, I turned to the medieval mystery plays. They're a collection of short plays based on the stories contained in the Bible, written and performed by lay people in about the fourteenth century. They dramatize the Bible episodes, often adding extra material and imagining the characters in vivid ways, as if they were people in medieval England. This morning I'd like to explore the play of the Appearance to Thomas, as it is called – because poetry and drama can often provide its own interpretation of the Bible.

In this play, Peter declares the resurrection to his fellow disciple Thomas:

*A brother Thomas we may be ryght glad
Of these gode Novell that we all now haue
The grace of oure lorde god is ouer vs all sprad
Oure lord is resyn his seuauntys to saue*

Thomas is, famously, not convinced:

*Be in pes Peter thou gynnest to rave
Thy wurdys be wantowne and ryght unwise
How xulde A deed man that deed lay in grave
With qwyk fflesche and blood to lyve ageyn ryse*

The playwright has added some flourishes here which emphasize elements of the Bible story. Thomas tells Peter “be in pes Peter”, meaning be quiet, stop talking – the equivalent of the old-fashioned expression “hold your peace” (as in the phrase which has been said a few times by this altar “speak now or forever hold your peace”.) This is not in the reading, but Jesus’ first words on appearing to Thomas are “peace be with you”. Thomas tells Peter to hold his peace, foreshadowing the peace which Jesus will bring.

Likewise he says Peter should be quiet because “tho gynnest to rave” – he is accusing Peter of being out of his senses – in medieval English, out of his wits. Those senses, or wits, are exactly what Thomas is demanding he be allowed to use to test whether Jesus is risen – his senses of sight and touch. They discuss the matter for some time, and Peter ends by hoping that:

*Cryste the comforte and chawgne ye thi bad witt
Ffor ffeyth but thou have thi sowle is but lorn
With stedfast believe god enforme the yitt
of A meke mayde As he was for us borne*

Once again, that emphasis on “witt”, the old word for the senses. Suddenly, Jesus appears in the play – just as in the reading today, there is no explanation and no-one announces his arrival. In the playtext the only way we can tell he has appeared on stage is that he suddenly has some lines to say:

*Pees be Amonge yow – beholde how I am torn
Take hede of myn handys my dere brothyr Thomas*

*My god and my lorde nyght and every morn
I Aske mercy lorde for my grett trespass*

Just as suddenly as he appears, Thomas suddenly believes. This is stressed by the fact that they share a stanza – Jesus gives the first two lines, and Thomas replies with the second, and their words rhyme with each other – torn, Thomas – morn, trespass. Thomas exclaims

*My lord and my god with sight do I se
That thou art now quyk which henge deed on rode
More feythful than I ther may no man be
Ffor myn hand haue I wasch in thi precious blode*

A remarkable bit of medieval gruesomeness, we might think, but this play lays great emphasis on the physicality of Jesus. He is physically there and very real. At the end of the play, Thomas gets his own great speech, a poem of several stanzas – I'll give you the first one here

*As a ravyscyd man whose witt is all gon
Grett mornynge I make for my dredfful dowte
Alas I was doweftful that cryst from vndyr ston
Be his owyn grett might no wyse myght gon owte
Alas what mevyd me thus in my thought
My doweftfull be-leve ryght sore me Avexit
The trewthe do I knowe that god so hath wroght
Quod mortuus et sepultur nunc resurrexit*

Once again, there's the mention of being like a "man whose witt is all gon" – his regret makes him talk as if he's out of his sense. He doubted that Jesus could "be his owyn grett might" come out "from undyr ston". But now he rejoices that "the trewthe I do knowe" and makes the magnificent rhyme that his doubt had him "avexit" they had "vexed him" but that – and this is the Latin "because he is thus risen from death and from the tomb", "Quod mortuus et sepultur nunc resurrexit". It's a lovely combination of the

earthiness and local dialect of the mystery plays mixed with their high theology and Latin quotation. My doubts right sore me avexit, but mortuus et sepultur nunc resurrexit.

I want to return to the play's action to explore something else that's going on. Because this short part of the mystery plays weave together the story of Thomas' doubts with the reading's insistence that "But these 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" In the reading these are two separate sections, obviously, with the writer stepping out of the story to address the reader. In the mystery play they are dramatized together. As I quoted above, Thomas asks

*How xulde A deed man that deed lay in grave
With qwyk fflesche and blood to lyve ageyn ryse*

The word "quick" here is the older English word for "alive". In fact I believe it survives in Yorkshire dialect as "wick", meaning lively or full of life. It has another famous resonance, though – the phrase "the quick and the dead" appears in the Creed in the Book of Common Prayer, speaking of Jesus, "he will come again to judge the quick and the dead". Of course the prayer book was later than the mystery plays, but "the quick and the dead" comes from a much older English text, the *Lay Folk's Mass Book*. This was a medieval manual for people attending church, translating and explaining parts of the service. In demanding how he could believe in the resurrection, Thomas uses the words "quick" and "dead", evoking the Creed for the audience.

Peter hopes that Thomas will be comforted and convinced by Jesus:

*Cryste the comforte and chawgne ye thi bad witt
Ffor ffeyth but thou have thi sowle is but lorn*

In the story, he says no such thing – it is the reader who is encouraged to believe in Jesus and gain life. But here the playwright gives Peter the orthodox theological view – “ffeyth but thou have”, that salvation comes only by faith.

When Jesus appears, Thomas exclaims

*My god and my lorde nyght and every morn
I Aske mercy lorde for my grett trespass*

He recognizes Christ as God and lord, as he does in the Gospel, but then adds he will ask mercy every evening and every morning for his sin. But the word he uses should again catch our ear – “my grett trespass”. The older version of the Lord’s Prayer asks that God should “forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive others than trespass against us”. In this play, as Thomas acclaim Jesus as Lord, he joins that to the act of saying the Lord’s Prayer every morning and evening.

And when Thomas declares that *More feythful than I ther may no man be
Ffor myn hand haue I wasch in thi precious blode* it is both a rather gross image and a theological statement. The gospel does not mention blood, but in the mystery play Thomas now has some of Jesus’ blood on him. The crucifixion has left its marks on Jesus, but the resurrection has left its mark on Thomas. The language, the plot and the imagery of this scene all weave the story together with the later statement that this was written that we might believe. By the end of the scene Thomas is both a character in the Bible story and a medieval Christian, but he also stands alongside us, reciting his Creed, saying the Lord’s Prayer, and grateful for the grace bestowed on him.