

The Source of Certainty

John 20:24-28 RSV

Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, 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 in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe."

Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. The doors were shut, but 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; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

Are bouts of unbelief as widespread as the common cold I wonder, as I reach for the tissues and blow my sore nose again? Though there are some happy souls untouched by doubt, it seems that many of us are at some time plagued by uncertainty, not only over things we can't see but the things we can see: scientists who scoff at any belief in God, a media that often mocks Christianity and points only to its scandals, and on top of that, a world that seems to challenge a God of love who indiscriminately shakes us to death or drowns us. Small wonder Christians can become unsure of their beliefs, and that we have seen many walk away from their faith.

Looking through our hymnbooks I found that even our hymn writers are not immune. For over a hundred and fifty years church-goers have been singing Charlotte Elliott's words, that she came to God "just as I am, though tossed about with many a conflict, many a doubt." The author of "God of grace and God of glory" pleads: "fears and doubts too long have bound us; free our hearts to work and praise."

It's hardly new: the list of faith-wobblers began with Abraham and Sarah. Skipping forward several millennia, some of the disciples were still uncertain at the time of the ascension, even after the doubt-exploding evidence of Jesus' resurrection.

And then there's Thomas. He wasn't present when Jesus appeared to the disciples on that first evening after the resurrection. When they told him they had seen Jesus, he refused to believe. It's true that the other disciples hadn't believed the women in the morning when they told them that they had seen Jesus, but Thomas takes it further. He is adamant – he wants forensic evidence: "Unless I see the nail holes in his hands, put my finger in the nail holes, and stick my hand in his side, I won't believe it."

The next week Thomas is there, in the shelter of the upper room and in the company of the disciples. Jesus returns and it is then that he offers to Thomas what he demands. Jesus calls Thomas to abandon his “unbelief” - and that is the word he used - not doubt.

Standing in front of the resurrected Jesus, Thomas takes a startling, instantaneous step of faith and understanding that goes so much further than any of the apostles and disciples had so far: he recognizes Jesus as God.

In the years to come the church would wrestle with just how Jesus is God, but the one who first stated this fact was Thomas. Lacking faith, he had nevertheless returned to the sanctuary of the upper room and the fellowship of believers and had received a sustaining life-changing revelation that only Christ could give.