

# Second Sunday of Easter

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## Introduction

John's account of the meeting between Thomas and the risen Jesus defies reduction to simply a narrative about 'faith' and the battle between 'doubt' and 'belief'. This particular story, while the content is different, has a very familiar shape and feel: we've encountered it on at least five other occasions in the course of John's Gospel – and indeed we might even see it as a microcosm of the journey on which John is taking his readers. It's a story of evolving understanding and an associated increasing trust and confidence – all held safely within a great hospitality of the heart. As such, it can also speak to us as we seek to deal with the conflicts we encounter in our daily living.

(For reflections which focus more on the opening verses of this passage see <https://www.spiritualityofconflict.com/readings/113/second-sunday-of-easter>; <https://www.spiritualityofconflict.com/readings/180/second-sunday-of-easter>; <https://www.spiritualityofconflict.com/readings/45/second-sunday-of-easter>)

## Preparation:

Choose someone who encounters Jesus in the course of John's Gospel (it could be within a single story such as the woman at the well, or a character who makes several appearances across the Gospel such as Nathanael or Nicodemus or Thomas). Find and read the verses involved and see what you notice about how that person changes and what brings this about.

*or*

Make a list of words/ideas, a collection of images, a collage of colours or a soundscape that you associate with hospitality.

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Text

When it was evening on that day, 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.

The familiar story of Thomas' encounter with the risen Jesus is often placed within an interpretative straight-jacket with arms labelled 'doubt' and 'belief' and then used to reinforce particular narratives about 'faith'. Such an approach encourages us to home-in on two things – 'doubting' Thomas himself, and the word 'believe' – and to connect them up in very particular, and sometimes unhelpful, ways.

However the point of the story is not really for us to focus on and pity/look down on/empathise with or feel smug in relation to, poor Thomas. In the end he is not actually behaving any differently from the other disciples: they had heard the women's story (but dismissed it as 'an idle tale') and some at least had seen the empty tomb for themselves, but it was not until Jesus came into the locked room *and* spoke peace to them *and* showed them his wounds that *then* (the Greek word *oun* used here is a conjunction indicating that something follows as a direct consequence) they recognise him and begin to grasp a little more strongly what is actually going on.

The encounter between Jesus and Thomas is actually a microcosm which John expands so that we can see in more detail something which is happening not just to/for the disciples but across his whole Gospel. This 'something' is a journey of evolving knowledge of, and deepening understanding about, Jesus – and of the consequences of this for those who make that journey. It is a journey which John also wants his readers to experience, and it is for this reason that he has written his Gospel (v31).

One of the ways he does this is by showing us different people on the same journey and thus throughout the narrative we see different characters as they encounter, and then engage, with Jesus. Nathanael (Jn 1), Nicodemus (Jn 3; 7; 19) the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn 4), the blind man in the temple (John 9), Martha and Mary (Jn 11), Mary Magdalene (Jn 20), Philip (Jn 1; 6; 12; 14), Peter (Jn 1; 6; 13; 18; 21) and Thomas himself (Jn 11; 14; 20; 21) all move (at differing speeds) from incomprehension, and sometimes downright scepticism ('can anything good come out of Nazareth?'), to a greater, though still incomplete, understanding of who Jesus is. In each instance Jesus offers what is needed – questions, invitations, conversations, actions – to help the person in question move from bewilderment to glimmers of understanding or better knowledge about himself; and hand-in-hand with this, into a deepening confidence in and love for him. From verses 30 and 31 we can infer both that more stages on the way were necessary before the disciples were at a place where the physical presence of Jesus was no longer necessary for their ongoing journey; and also that John thinks his readers who have never had that experience of physical presence have still had enough information via his Gospel to make progress along their own journey unto understanding.

This brings us to the second element of the Thomas story highlighted above – the verb 'believe'. *Pisteu* is a word which occurs frequently in John's Gospel (ninety-nine times as opposed to ten or less in each of the synoptics\*); but both the verb and its cognate noun *pistis* are more subtle and shaded than the way 'believe' and 'faith' – the words commonly used to translate them – are often used. In both dictionary definition and general usage the former is primarily taken to signify the acceptance of something as true or real, and the latter as belief in the truth of something even (or especially) in the absence of material evidence. In the context of religion these often then become coupled with specific dogmatic statements (which vary according to theological stance). However as Pauline scholar Jouette Bassler notes 'neither conveys all the shades of meaning found in the Greek terms'. Thus while it can suggest the intellectual activity of credence or belief, the primary nuance of the Greek noun is 'trust or confidence' and is indicative of 'an active stance of firm reliance on someone or something'. Similarly the verb encompasses both trusting *in* and relying *on* something or someone, as well as believing *that*.\*\*

If we look at this within some of the overarching themes of John's gospel, it seems that what he is pointing us towards is the necessity, not of assent to specific propositional 'truths', but of becoming persuaded of the identity and purpose of

Jesus, and thus of a developing and deepening confidence in and reliance on these. This 'coming to know' is a strong thread in John's gospel and goes hand in hand with the language of love which is also one of its prominent features. But such evolving understanding, and the movement into fuller, deeper knowledge, requires an ongoing intimacy of engagement: this is not an isolated cognitive exercise but something which happens within a context of relational hospitality (and indeed we sometimes also see Jesus receiving this as part of his own journey of understanding). It is noteworthy that even when Jesus seems to be a little exasperated with the obtuseness of his disciples or others he encounters (such as Nicodemus) he never rejects or condemns them – instead he offers them what *they* need to take the next step. In the case of Mary, it was to say her name, in that of Thomas, it was to give him the opportunity to see for himself what others had reported. This hospitality of the heart allows Jesus to take the time and make the room that those around him need in order to grow in their understanding, confidence and trust.

\*W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (London: Oliphant, 1978), vol I p. 116.

\*\* Jouette M. Bassler, *Navigating Paul: An Introduction to Key Theological Concepts* (Louisville; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), pp23–24.

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## Response

The journey towards better understandings, or greater trust of someone, is one which is often part of a conflict situation. Whilst some aspects of this may well be primarily a cognitive exercise (getting ourselves better informed about a history which is not our own for example), others will look much more like the sort of journey which we see Thomas and others taking in John's Gospel. These pathways towards a better understanding of someone and their story, purposes and choices will also require a similar attitude of relational hospitality – and the capacity to both offer and receive such hospitality when necessary.

Revisit some of the stories which John shares with us about this and consider one or more of the following questions in the light of these.

- What can we learn from the way Jesus makes space in which people can explore things they either don't understand or need to understand better?
  - Are any of the ways in which Jesus helps people on this journey into understanding ones which we could also employ in the context of a conflict situation we are in?
  - What can we learn from these stories about how to use/not abuse relational hospitality when it is offered to us in a conflict situation as a place for deepening understanding of or connection with someone?
  - What might the endpoint of such a journey of 'persuasive understanding' look like in a conflict in which you are currently involved?
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## Prayer

Jesus,  
the generous hospitality of your heart  
kept people safe  
as they undertook their journeys  
towards greater understanding,

encouraged them fittingly  
as they moved forward,

held them kindly  
when they blundered on the way,

and welcomed them warmly  
as they drew nearer to you.

May we show  
a like generosity in making  
safe, appropriate, kindly  
and welcoming spaces  
in which others can explore  
new understandings;

and may we know and respond  
with a willing openness  
when others  
offer such spaces to us  
as we undertake those  
journeys ourselves.

Amen