

- Today we have the story of Thomas' encounter with Jesus risen from the dead.
- It's the story from which we get our expression, "doubting Thomas".

- And the first thing I want to say in all of this is that I think Thomas gets a bad press.
- And I think "doubt" actually gets a bad press as well.
- But let's start with Thomas.

- If we consider today's gospel passage a bit more closely, it actually becomes clear that Thomas is really no more or less doubtful than the other disciples.
- Thomas does not ask for much more than the other disciples received when Jesus first appeared to them in Thomas's absence.
- On that occasion Jesus voluntarily shows the disciples his hands and his sides, so that they might see evidence of the wounds of his crucifixion and it is only then that they recognise him.
- And Thomas simply asks for the same with the added demand that he actually touch Jesus' wounds.
- And, in fact, when Thomas does so his recognition of Jesus is all the greater.
- It is he alone, among the disciples who says,
 - "My Lord *and my God*".
- So Thomas is certainly no more of a doubter than the other disciples.

- But let's talk about this word "doubt".

- In the translation we are using, Jesus says to Thomas,
 - "Do not doubt, but believe".
- But that word "doubt" is actually a bit of a mistranslation.
- A more literal reading would be
 - "Do not be unbelieving, but believing".
- Now that might sound like a bit of semantic hair-splitting but it is important because this story does not focus on doubt and scepticism, but on the grounds of faith.

- And the point of the story is that Jesus gives Thomas what Thomas needs in order to come to a greater faith.
- This is the story of God's generosity through Jesus.

- Thomas needs a sign in order for his faith, which is already there, to blossom into fullness.
- And Jesus does not reprimand Thomas for this, but makes available to him exactly what he needs for that blossoming to occur.
- And that seems like just the kind of thing that we need to hear.

- None of us has the perfect faith.
- None of us manage the blissful serenity of perfect confidence in God's love and providence 100% of the time.
- And even that is setting the bar too high for most of us.
- But what this story tells us is that though we might struggle to take hold of the promise of God's presence and God's love, God is forever reaching towards us with that promise,
 - coming close to us so that we might come closer to God.
- God is forever making God's self available to us so that we might continue to grow in our belief.

- Now, all of that is a good thing.
- More than a good thing.
- It is all about the life-giving hope and grace of a love that knows no bounds.

- But I still want to talk about doubt.

- Thomas may no longer be the great doubter, but what about the rest of us who find ourselves wondering and struggling with faith and belief?

- The first thing I want to say is that doubt and faith are not mutually exclusive categories.

- The great 20th century theologian Paul Tillich suggests that far from being its opposite, doubt is actually an element of faith.
- Frederich Buechner puts it somewhat more bluntly and playfully when he writes,
 - "Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don't have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving".
- And as Archbishop Desmond Tutu, points out, the opposite of faith is actually indifference, not doubt.
- And that is because faith and belief are not about a set of intellectual propositions that can be proved or disproved.
- They are about an orientation,
 - an openness to the experience of God's presence and God's purpose in our lives and in the world.
- The Latin word "credo" from which we get our word "creed" and which is usually translated "I believe" does not refer to the assent we give to a set of statements that are verifiable and true according to scientific criteria.
- At its root, *credo* means quite literally "to give your heart to",
 - "to commit your allegiance to".
 - It's a heart thing, not a head thing.
- And it is this sense that is present in our passage from John's gospel.
- Jesus' call to Thomas to believe, is actually a call to Thomas to give his heart to Jesus.
- It is a call to love.
- So to believe in God is actually to love God and all that God loves.
- And that is what our faith is about.
- It is about responding to God's love with our own.
- Its about setting our feet upon a path, not knowing the destination, but going anyway because the love of God calls us on and our hearts respond even if we cannot always make sense of it with our heads.