

Poole Bay Methodist Circuit worship
Sunday 7th April 2024

“Poor Thomas!” - Led by Dr Julian Tawn

This service can be found on my YouTube channel: https://youtu.be/qRx-T_t7Gbw

Hello everyone. It's Julian Tawn here again, leading worship for Sunday 7th April 2024. Today we will be looking at the story of Thomas. I have a soft spot for Thomas, and I think that history has dealt somewhat sharply with him!

So let us join together in worshipping our wonderful risen Lord!

Come, let's open our hearts and minds,
and raise our voices in worship—
together, right here, right now!

Let us pray.

Loving Lord,
we gather together, and in this moment, to worship you.
We come as we are – young and not so young, happy, sad,
worried, carefree – full of faith or maybe struggling a bit.
And we know that, here in this place,
we will meet with you, and you will meet with us.
Risen Lord, together, may we discover more of you,
and experience your presence
not only in our worship, but throughout our lives.

Amen.

Our first hymn this morning is a hymn of praise, number **301** in Singing the Faith, “Hail, Thou once despised Jesus!” It probably goes without saying, though I will say it anyway, that there is an organ accompaniment on the video and audio files, and a YouTube link on the sheet for those who can use it.

<https://youtu.be/BEuqqDZm2gg?si=2N67-Vf4bpOllc4j>

Hail, Thou once despised Jesus! Hail, Thou Galilean King!
Thou didst suffer to release us; Thou didst free salvation bring.
Hail, Thou universal Saviour, who hast borne our sin and shame!
By Thy merits we find favour; life is given through Thy Name.

Jesus, hail! enthroned in glory, there forever to abide;
All the heavenly hosts adore Thee, seated at Thy Father's side.
There for sinners Thou art pleading; there Thou dost our place prepare;
Thou for saints art interceding till in glory they appear.

Worship, honour, power and blessing Christ is worthy to receive;
Loudest praises, without ceasing, right it is for us to give.
Help, ye bright angelic spirits, bring your sweetest, noblest lays;
Help to sing of Jesus' merits, help to chant Emmanuel's praise!

Opening Prayers

Father God, you are always there for us,
whether we feel it or not.
Lord Jesus, you come to us today, and say: ‘Peace be with you’;
we open our hearts and receive your perfect peace into our imperfect doubting lives.
Holy Spirit, you lead us to the fullness of joy;
we can’t wait to experience you more.
Come, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Lord, the disciples came together, even though they were afraid.
Forgive us for the times we keep ourselves to ourselves,
whether through fear, or any other reason.
Unlock our hearts to you, Lord.
May we stop doubting and believe.

The disciples weren’t trying to lock you out;
they weren’t even expecting you.
Forgive us for the times when we, consciously or unconsciously, try to keep you at a distance—
when we just have ‘stuff’ that distracts.
Unlock our hearts to you, Lord.
May we stop doubting and believe.

Thomas really wanted Jesus to be alive, but he hung out for his own experience.
Forgive us for the times we take second-hand information
and miss out on the personal experience of the fullness of your presence.
Unlock our hearts to you, Lord.
May we stop doubting and believe.

Sometimes we do come, but without proper preparation,
rushing into your presence, and not thinking much about what will happen next.
Unlock our hearts to you, Lord.
May we stop doubting and believe.

Jesus freely gave the disciples power, through the Holy Spirit,
to forgive people’s sins.
And we thank you, God, for the touch of your spirit in our lives,
the assurance of forgiveness when we truly repent.
We unlock our hearts to you, Lord.
You grant us your peace.
Amen.

Jesus showed Thomas his hands and side;
the man was overjoyed at his presence.
We too are filled with joy to meet with you.
Thank you that you send us forth in your name,
to do your will, and to be your presence in the world.
Thank you that you are always with us.
In you there is a world of joys and excitement still to be unlocked.

We praise you, Lord.

Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory, forever and ever. **Amen.**

I'm now going to read to you a short story I have written, which looks at some of the events of Passion week from the perspective of Thomas.

It's not fair! Okay, I know, life isn't fair, but this just isn't right. I'm always remembered for one moment of weakness. Nobody calls Peter, “Peter the Denier.” James and John aren't called, “The Glory Seekers.” Yet I'm always known as, “Doubting Thomas.” I'm not proud of what I said, but I only put into words what everyone had been thinking all day!

We were all together in the room where we had shared that wonderful meal with Jesus – the eleven remaining disciples and many of the women who had been followers of Jesus. Jesus had tried to warn us of what was about to happen, but we didn't get it. We all had our own ideas of what sort of Messiah Jesus was going to be, but the thought of crucifixion hadn't occurred to any of us.

Then, within a matter of hours, Jesus had been betrayed by Judas, one of us for goodness' sake. Yes, I know that John suspected him of taking some of the money, but he had walked with us, talked with us and eaten with us. We were friends, or so we'd thought. Jesus had been arrested, and we had run off.

Peter and Nathaniel summoned the courage to go and watch the fiasco of a trial before the Sanhedrin. But Peter was spotted, and he denied even knowing Jesus! Three times!! He feels pretty wretched about it now.

Only the women dared to mingle with the crowd while Jesus was before Pilate. No one takes much notice of women in these parts, but it still took a lot of bottle to do it, God bless 'em. However, that meant that they saw Jesus being flogged – a sight that will be etched into their souls for the rest of their lives.

Then came the crucifixion. John summoned up the courage to go with the women, but the rest of us kept in the shadows, out of sight. There was darkness and an earthquake, and Jesus our Lord and our friend was dead. The light returned to the land after he died, but darkness persisted in our souls.

We spent the Sabbath together in the upper room, and the women prepared food for us. We decided to keep a low profile in case the authorities were searching for us.

The women had other ideas, though. They decided to visit the tomb with spices and perfume to make sure Joseph and Nicodemus had done a proper job. We said that it was a waste of time as they wouldn't be able to move the stone at the entrance of the tomb. But no one was changing their minds.

So, they got up at the crack of dawn on the next day to visit the tomb. It wasn't long before they rushed back in, saying that the tomb was open, and the body was gone! They had seen two men dressed in shining white who told them that Jesus wasn't dead but had been raised to life. This seemed a bit far-fetched to us all, so Peter and John went to look for themselves. They didn't see anyone, but they confirmed that the grave had been opened and the body wasn't there anymore. John had an odd, quizzical look about him.

Mary Magdalene also returned to the tomb but stayed a little longer. When she returned, she was as white as a sheet, and she claimed to have seen and spoken with our Lord. She was adamant, but we were still uncertain.

So, I decided to look for myself. If Jesus was alive, I wanted to see him. I wasn't convinced, but I had to look for myself. I didn't get to the tomb though because some of the Pharisees and Temple guards were there looking around. I didn't want to get caught, so I started walking around the streets where he had taught, to see if I could find him. I lost track of time and it began to get dark.

When I returned to the upper room, it was absolute chaos. Everyone was singing and praising God. It was a praise party! Philip and Nathaniel came over to me.

“Where have you been, Thomas! You missed it all! First, Cleopas and his friend came back and told us they had seen the Lord. He walked and talked with them on the way to Emmaus. He broke bread with them! Then He was here. He just appeared. We saw the scars in his hands, feet and side. At first, we thought He was a ghost, but no! We touched Him and He ate some fish. He's alive, Thomas! It's real! Where were you?”

I was so frustrated. I was the only one who had gone out looking for Jesus, and now I was the only one who hadn't seen Him. It wasn't fair. So, I vented my feelings out loud.

“Unless I have proof, real tangible proof, there's no way I'm believing it. I need to see his hands and feet myself, and touch his scars,” I said. Not my finest hour.

Jesus kept me waiting a whole week, but I needed the time to process what had happened. I really did believe it because I trusted my friends. They wouldn't have done this as a wind-up. But I was jealous. Jesus had appeared to my friends, and not to me. I see now that Jesus was teaching me patience. Sometimes we should be content to wait on God rather than run about trying to force things.

Then, the following week, when we were all together again, there He was. Jesus, standing in front of me!

“Peace be with you,” He said. Then gently, so gently He spoke to me. “Thomas, come over. Here are my wounds, here's your proof. Touch them and cast your doubts to the wind and believe.”

I was so ashamed. I threw myself at His feet and exclaimed, “You are my Lord and my God!”

Then Jesus said, “You have believed because you were given proof, Thomas. How blessed are all those who will take it on trust.”

I know now that Jesus was beginning to commission us for the task ahead, taking his gospel far and wide so that more and more people will hear the truth and have the faith to take it on trust.

Our Gospel reading for today is taken from John 20: 19-31.

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

²¹ Again Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’²² And with that he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’²³ If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.’

²⁴ Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came.²⁵ So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord!’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.’

²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.’

²⁸ Thomas said to him, ‘My Lord and my God!’

²⁹ Then Jesus told him, ‘Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.’

Our second hymn for today is, “Low in the grave He lay”, which is number **305** in Singing the Faith. You know about the organ accompaniment and YouTube link, of course!

<https://youtu.be/9kown2rxc0M?si=0FII9Q37eU1P-h4f>

Low in the grave He lay, Jesus my Saviour,
Waiting the coming day, Jesus my Lord!
Refrain

Up from the grave He arose,
With a mighty triumph o'er His foes,
He arose a Victor from the dark domain,
And He lives forever, with His saints to reign.
He arose! He arose!
Hallelujah! Christ arose!

Vainly they watch His bed, Jesus my Savior;
Vainly they seal the dead, Jesus my Lord!
Refrain

Death cannot keep its Prey, Jesus my Savior;
He tore the bars away, Jesus my Lord!
Refrain

Reflection

Last year, I was able to join in with Spring Harvest 2023 from home. Chris and I had intended to go in person, but then she had some painful problems with her knee, and the online option seemed better. What a privilege to be able to join in with the worship and teaching while in the comfort of my own home. I didn't have to be there!

It made me think of when I was a boy. Our first television was a black and white model, with only two channels. Then came our first colour television, with three channels! However, videos and DVDs hadn't been invented. We had to get the Radio Times to find out what was on and when. This was particularly important at Christmas and Easter when there were special programmes. You had to note down what you wanted to see and make sure that you were in to see it! You couldn't video it and watch it later. On demand streaming was not possible. If you weren't there, you missed it.

We are all familiar with the story of Thomas in today's Gospel reading from John. He has missed out on the appearance of Jesus to the other 10 disciples. He will also be aware of Cleopas returning to Jerusalem with his unnamed friend, telling of their encounter with Jesus on the Emmaus Road. So, Jesus has appeared to Mary Magdalene, possibly to some other women, to Cleopas and his friend and then the rest of the disciples, and Thomas has missed out. We do not know where he was, but somehow, he missed the main event.

So, what was his response? *'Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.'* (John 20:25)

The resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is the most important event of human history. If it did not happen, the most influential world religion is a sham. If it did happen, *"all things are possible"* (Matthew 19:26).

The resurrection is a fantastic claim. Jesus' own disciples did not believe it at first. Initially, the words of the women who found the empty tomb seemed to them *"like nonsense."* Thomas appears to struggle more than anyone with his doubts. However, in his experience in particular there is hope for all of us stumbling doubters. Jesus knows how and when to reach us.

Jesus's death had been difficult and confusing, horrifying and disorientating for everyone. Having been welcomed into Jerusalem like a king, he was dead before the week was over. And when the shepherd was struck the sheep scattered (Mark 14:27). But they re-gathered in a secret hideout in Jerusalem.

So, let us try to get into the mind of Thomas. I feel sorry for Thomas, because he is remembered for doubting, when initially all the disciples were doubting. It was the Sunday following the crucifixion and things took a weird twist. It began with Mary Magdalene insisting that she had seen Jesus alive that morning. True, Jesus's body disappearing was admittedly strange. But still, everyone knew Jesus had really died. No one could really believe Mary's claim, except maybe John.

Then later in the day Peter announced that he also had seen Jesus alive. This troubled Thomas. But he figured he could cut Peter some slack. After denying Jesus publicly, who could blame Peter for desperately wishing it to be true. He just needed time.

Thomas desperately missed Jesus, but he wasn't going to let grief make him believe bizarre things. Jesus was dead.

Yet he didn't feel like dousing everyone's unreal hope with a wet blanket of reality. They weren't ready to hear it anyway. Perhaps that is why Thomas decided he needed to clear his head with a walk. By himself. Or perhaps he was looking for Jesus, to see for himself.

So, after whispering a discreet excuse to Nathaniel, he managed to slip outside without notice. After being careful not to betray the hideout, he covered his head and started down an empty street.

The quiet was refreshing. But the walk wasn't as helpful as he had hoped. The Jesus sightings disturbed him, especially because the witnesses were credible. He knew them. They certainly weren't liars. They weren't unstable. None were given to delusions. Peter, particularly, was a rock of reason.

Then a rush of memories from the past three years flowed through Thomas's mind. He had seen so many things that would have been unbelievable if he hadn't seen them. Most haunting right now was Lazarus.

And Jesus had seemed to know that He was going to die in Jerusalem. He had said those strange things about death and resurrection.

Suddenly Thomas realised he was arguing with himself. His agitation really wasn't over his friends' failure to face the facts. The facts, in fact, were now confusing. He was agitated because part of him actually believed Jesus was alive again. That's what Jesus had meant, wasn't it? But this frustrated the sceptic in him who took pride in being a man of common sense. A resurrection just seemed too incredible to be true.

The more he thought, the less sure he became. No one knew where Jesus' body was. Those who claimed to have seen him were people he trusted. It would make sense of certain prophecies. Could it be?

Show me the body! his sceptic side shouted. At least Lazarus could be seen and touched in Bethany by any doubter. So, if Jesus really was alive, why this “hide and seek” game? Wouldn't He just show himself to them all?

He would believe Jesus was alive when he saw him alive.

When Thomas returned to the house four of his friends pounced on him, “We have seen the Lord (v. 24), Thomas! It's all true! He was just with us! Where were you?”

Thomas felt a surge of shock, unbelief. Then he felt regret for having left. Then he felt isolated. He was now the only one who hadn't seen Jesus.

In self-pity fuelled anger he blurted out with probably more conviction than he felt, *‘Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.’* (v. 25).

Most of his friends were dismayed. But Peter just watched him, smiling slightly.

The following seven days must have been long and lonely for Thomas. His friends were gracious. No one berated him. It was, in fact, their calm confidence in Jesus' resurrection that aggravated Thomas' growing conviction that he was wrong. Outside he tried to maintain a façade of resolute intellectual scepticism, but inside he was wrestling and melting and wanting more than anything to see Jesus too.

And then it happened. Thomas was staring at the floor, sinking again under the fear that maybe Jesus had rejected him because of his stubborn unbelief. If so, he knew he deserved it. Then someone gasped. He looked up and his heart leaped into his throat! Jesus was standing across the room looking at him. *“Peace be with you”* (v. 26).

Thomas could hardly breathe. ²⁷ *Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.’* (v27).

All objections and resistance in Thomas evaporated. And in tears of repentance, relief, and worship Thomas dropped on his knees before Jesus and exclaimed, *“My Lord and my God”* (v. 28).

Thomas had been with Jesus for three years, so he knew Him well. When Jesus stood before Thomas all doubt was dispelled and he didn’t need faith to believe anymore, because he had the certainty of Jesus standing in front of him.

Jesus came to Thomas, but he did not come right away. Jesus let Thomas wrestle with his unbelief first. It exposed weaknesses in Thomas’s faith. It made him think hard about what he believed and why. I’m sure it made him more desperate and humbler. But when the time was ripe, Jesus rescued Thomas from his doubts.

We can take heart from this because Jesus does the same for all of his doubting sheep, including us. When Thomas makes his declaration of belief, Jesus responds with a gentle rebuke which is also a blessing to us. ²⁹ *Then Jesus told him, ‘Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.’*

This is where we all come in because we have not seen Jesus bodily and yet we believe. But, because we have not seen with our own eyes, we will be plagued by doubt from time to time. It is not that faith means having the absence of doubt. No, rather faith means the strength to overcome doubt. To keep on believing even when evidence seems to the contrary. That strength comes from Him, from the Holy Spirit dwelling within. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was essential to support the faith of believers who were not alive at the time of the resurrection. We cannot do it in our own strength. It is when we try to do this that we are in danger of being overwhelmed by doubt. But when we bring our doubts to Christ and confess them, He graciously gives us the strength to keep believing.

I think that I can safely say that we have all experienced times of doubt in our walk with Jesus. Consider these words written in a letter years ago:

“Jesus has a very special love for you. As for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear.

“There is such terrible darkness within me, as if everything was dead. When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven — there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul. — I am told God loves me — and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul. Did I make a mistake?”

Hear the doubt?

But do you also hear the wrestling? Here is someone who's not giving up, but is continuing to struggle, listen, yearn for God, even in the midst of the doubt.

That's Mother Teresa.

We have to remember that even when we have difficulty seeing Him, He is always with us. He won't leave us, but He may hide Himself for a while, as with Cleopas and His friend. When I lost my wife, Jill, I went through a long period of doubt and questioning. I can honestly say that I never stopped believing in God (I needed to be angry with somebody!), but I had great difficulty in believing in a loving God. I did not feel the presence of God with me at all. I know that I am not alone in that experience – read Psalms or Lamentations, or Job. But, looking back now, I can see that God was still with me, working in me to bring me to the place where I now am. Yes, it was painful at times, but it was necessary.

The world is still going through a painful period right now, and we, God's people have not been spared from pain. Some of us have been questioning, and yet we know from the truth of Easter that God is with us and He loves us. Like the father of the possessed boy in Mark 9, sometimes we have to cry out, *'I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!'*

What does Thomas look at when Jesus appears before him? His eyes, piercing and deep? His face, open and available? The way He walks into the room, gently but with authority? These are what we'd normally look at to recognise a person. But no, Thomas looks at Jesus' wounds. The nail holes, the pierced side. Those epicentres of pain.

If like Thomas you're feeling doubt about whether the resurrection is true, whether life really wins out over death... or if like Mother Teresa you doubt whether God really loves you... then it's time to look into the wounded places in the world. We need to be in touch with people who are wounded, people who are down and out, people who are poor, people the world has forgotten... Because that's where Jesus said He'd be.

So, as we continue to learn to live in this post pandemic world, we must be sensitive that people around us will have great difficulty appreciating that we represent a God of love. The sense of loss and pain may be too raw still. We have to be patient and loving, meeting people in their need. As we do, God in Jesus will be working through us, so when the time is right hearts will be opened to God's Kingdom. This is the time to believe that God will work His miracle of resurrection again – right here, right now!

The Lord is risen! Yes, he really is. ***“Stop doubting and believe.” Amen.***

We come now to our prayers of intercession, that is prayers for other people. I am preparing this service two weeks in advance, so these are somewhat generic. Please feel free to pause the video / audio to pray your own prayers about issues of the day.

Heavenly Father, we pray for all the places in the world that need your peace:
 places where wars continue to threaten the stability of the nations;
 and the lack of peace has caused so much destruction;
 places where people have to flee their homes, their families destroyed, lives lost.
Lord, bring your peace which passes all understanding.

Give wisdom to world leaders:

to presidents, prime ministers, politicians of all governments,
that they may strive for lasting peace and true justice,
not putting personal ambitions before the needs of their people.

Lord, bring your peace which passes all understanding.

We pray for those who need peace of mind:

those weighed down by the stresses and strains of everyday life,
or who suffer with anxiety, or are oppressed by worry and fear;
for those who find it hard to let go of things and simply trust.

Lord, bring your peace which passes all understanding. Amen.

Well, we come now to our final hymn, which is number **312** in Singing the Faith, “The head that once was crowned with thorns is crowned with glory now.” There is an organ accompaniment on the video and audio files and a YouTube link for those who can use it.

https://youtu.be/Aw2U_sf02II?si=SnaaeJP87RgOQBch

The head that once was crowned with thorns
Is crowned with glory now;
A royal diadem adorns
The mighty victor's brow.

The highest place that Heav'n affords
Belongs to Him by right;
The King of kings and Lord of lords,
And Heaven's eternal Light.

The joy of all who dwell above,
The joy of all below,
To whom He manifests His love,
And grants His Name to know.

To them the cross with all its shame,
With all its grace, is given;
Their name an everlasting name,
Their joy the joy of Heaven.

They suffer with their Lord below;
They reign with Him above;
Their profit and their joy to know
The mystery of His love.

The cross He bore is life and health,
Though shame and death to Him,
His people's hope, His people's wealth,
Their everlasting theme.

Blessing

Lord Jesus,
walk with us through this week,
support us when we try to see the truth
in things that puzzle us.
Give us courage to search for answers,
and hold us in your unfailing and all-encompassing love,
each and every day.

Amen.

Thank you once again for allowing me to spend this time in worship with you. I wish you God's blessing throughout the week to come. Take great care of yourselves.

Julian Tawn

24th March 2024