

24 April 2022, Easter 2

**Acts 5: 27-32; John 20: 19-end**

*Ashdon w Hadstock final service*

### 1. **Thomas and reasons to believe**

The account of Thomas is one that is read each year on the Sunday after Easter, and it throws up questions for us about the nature of belief. It is a very human account that speaks of a very human reaction on the part of Thomas, unable to believe this incredibly good news until he sees for himself. ‘Seeing is believing’ we say, and this is often true. We can imagine a desperately ill friend or relative amazingly recovered after a serious illness, and the need to see them for ourselves.

Yet seeing with our own eyes is not the only possible basis for belief. In the courts, juries rely on the evidence of witnesses to determine whether someone is telling the truth. In our other reading, from Acts, Peter is speaking to his accusers and claims that his account is credible because he and his companions were **witnesses** to what happened.

We may also believe something because it makes sense in terms of our other knowledge of the way the world works, or in terms of other known facts. I know that a certain country has a tropical climate; I know that coconuts grow in the tropics, so I am not surprised to hear that this country grows coconuts. I believe this to

be true when I am told it. Things can also make sense in another way: they may offer an explanation of other unexplained matters. I love reading detective novels: often then there is a process by which only one explanation fits the facts and makes sense of them. Another example of this may be if we see a change in a person as a result of something they have experienced. A friend who was deeply depressed suddenly changes into someone able to enjoy life again. We wonder what can have happened to effect such a change, and they tell us of a wonderful experience or something they read. The change in their behaviour convinces us that this was real for them in some way even if it cannot be proven.

And finally we may believe something because we have tested it and found it reliable. I believe in the ‘world wide web’, the ‘cloud’ and my computer, and I rely on them even though I have no idea about what it all means. I regularly fly in a plane and cross the QEII bridge without any understanding of the technology involved. Many of the things on which my life is based are taken on trust of this kind.

### 2. **The basis for our beliefs today**

A mixture of these factors may form the basis for religious belief, and different people rely on different sorts of

evidence. A while ago, a man set out to write a book based on historical evidence (Morison 'Who moved the stone' *first published* 1930) disproving the resurrection of Jesus, but ended up convincing himself of its reality. Others believe on the basis of the witness testimonies that we have in the Bible, though of course we can no longer question even these witnesses.

For me, the change in the behaviour of the followers of Jesus, from cowed, frightened people hiding behind closed doors to confident passionate men and women prepared even to die for this truth they had seen is more powerful and convincing.

Yet the strongest reason for my own faith is that I have found it makes sense in terms of my own life and things I see around me. Trust in God has held me up over many years in ways that I cannot always explain. For me, it is not about what happened 2000 years ago, but about what happens **now**. Many matters of faith remain for me a complete mystery, but that is no barrier. I do not have to understand it all, simply join in with what I think of as the dance of faith. For me, and for many others, doubt is not the opposite of faith but can co-exist with it. I can pray with the father of a child healed by Jesus 'Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief.' (Mark 9: 24)

### 3. An Easter people: how does this change things?

So what does belief in the resurrection amount to? If you were in church last week you will have heard either Alan or I define resurrection as something that reveals the nature of God, and is also a proclamation about humanity and about the world. **It tells us that life and love are stronger than death; that that which is healing and creative ultimately triumphs over the things that separate and injure us.**

Through the resurrection, God endorsed all that Jesus taught and was. It tells us that something positive can come even from the worst of situations if we cooperate with the forces for good.

We have just watched a recorded TV programme about the tsunami that took place in 2004. This was the biggest natural disaster that the world has seen. It included the account of the search of a man for his missing brother, and the incredible charity work still being done by him and his parents in memory of that brother who died in that tragedy. We have a similar instance here in Ashdon. And you will know of people who have risen from loss and grief to new heights of compassion for others. Pain and loss still exist and hurt, of course they do, but they do not need to have the last word.

The church claims to be an Easter people, also to be the body of Christ. So what difference can this faith in new life make for us?

For us as individuals, it means we go forward in the knowledge that God remains with us, loving us and helping us in times of difficulty. Trust is not easy, and I have spoken before about this. But even in times of darkness and confusion, we can still hold onto God's presence with us, which means that we need not be afraid.

And as a church we too go forward with confidence, doing our best to play our part in changing circumstances. We should be a people who can share our disappointments and losses and support each other in them, who strive to love each other, different as we are. A people who study God's word together looking how the story of God gives a context for our own personal stories, and who are sustained by Him as we go on, symbolically in the meal that we call Holy Communion, but also by our more general fellowship with each other. There is often greater sharing over a cup of coffee after the service than there is within it, and that is fine. Our sharing together is also the fuel and the support that should enable us to share love with those around. We are not perfect, and need help to be truly his people, but that is forgiveness and help that we are promised.

Alan and I are really sad to be leaving you all. You have welcomed us and shared so much of your life here with us, and this has become part of our own journey of faith that will sustain us as we move on. A new phase is opening for us and for you. One that is to a large extent unknown and that may appear reduced, but that will contain new challenges to which we all will rise with God's help. So may we all go forward confidently in his name and in his strength.

**Amen**