

Knowing the fullness of life by Kate Harper

We refuse to engage with doubt and darkness, and so we miss knowing the fullness of life.

Last week we celebrated Easter and we talked about the Resurrection, and we were joyful and we got to think about all the wonderful bits of being Christians. This week, we are presented with Doubting Thomas, who brings us all back to earth with a bit of a bump, with his refusal to believe what he cannot see. Maybe he puts into words some of our own thoughts, some of our own reluctance to believe what we cannot see and cannot prove. It can be quite an uncomfortable story, in which we are told that there is a blessing in believing what we cannot see.

Thomas initially misses out on the experience of seeing Jesus, and, probably because of the amount of trauma and horror the disciples have experienced over the past few days, he refuses to believe what they say. I have to say that this does not strike me as terribly unreasonable. Trauma can make people believe all manner of strange things, and I am sure that the disciples knew that just as well as we do. I also think that we need to remember that none of them were especially quick to believe that Christ was risen when they were first told. What does strike me, though, is that the gospel does not explain why Thomas missed seeing Jesus that first time. What was he doing? Why wasn't he with everyone else? How did Thomas come to be separated from his community? Had he gone off to mourn on his own? Gone back to his mum? Popped to the shops? We do not know.

As you all know, I am currently experiencing separation from my community at home in Yorkshire. I am a member of a church called Heslington Local Ecumenical Partnership, which is about

three times the size of Seekers, and wedged between a university and a little farming village. It is an Anglican Methodist partnership church, and I have been going there since I first moved to York six years ago. It is my home, the people there are my spiritual community and, as I have discovered, I really need them.

I came to America determined to make it on my own, without the backup of a community. I had recently had a period of bad clinical depression, and I was determined to show myself that I could "fix myself" on my own. While I was preparing this sermon I spent a lot of time thinking about this, and I went back and found a copy of an email that I wrote to a friend while I was getting ready to leave York.

What I am scared of is being able to get through everyday life on my own, knowing that there almost certainly will be more moments when I get stuck. I need to know that I can get myself moving and feeling better, without a crisis to kick me into action, or someone else picking me up and making me happy. I need to be able to make myself happy. Or at least make myself content and functional. America will be a good test of that: I won't have any of my usual support systems, so I will have to manage by myself. In many ways, I am going to America to test myself.

It took me about a week to figure out that this was not going to work. Moreover, to my great surprise, I discovered that after a couple of days, I was really craving physical contact. I just needed a hug. I think part of this was because at home, I have a little dog, who likes to wedge herself in next to me whenever I sit down, and insists on sleeping with her head in my armpit, and I really miss her. Moreover, I was also missing everyday physical contact with my friends and family: giving someone a hug when I meet them, sitting next to one of my friends in the evening, bumping into my flatmates as we try to all cook at the same time in our very small kitchen.

Last week Margery talked to us about April, and about the experiences in South Africa that made her realise how much she needed a spiritual community. My experience has been very similar (leaving aside the part where April was robbed at gunpoint). After I'd been here for just a couple of weeks, I was messing about on the internet one afternoon, and discovered, via a Yorkshire newspaper, that a friend of mine, who's also a member of both my church and my department at university, had been sentenced to six years in prison for rape. I was horrified. Moreover, I suddenly became aware that I did not have anyone to talk to about it. I did not know anyone in the States well enough, and it was the middle of the night at home. In the end, I decided that this was a big enough emergency to wake up my family. Nonetheless, over the next few weeks, what I really noticed was how hard I was finding it to process what had happened in the absence of my community, particularly because it brought back memories of the sexual abuse that I suffered when I was a teenager. Like Thomas, without having seen what had happened, I found it extremely difficult to believe that it had. I wanted to talk about how I was feeling with people who were experiencing the same sense of shock and betrayal as I was, and there was no one around. It made me profoundly aware of how much I rely on my community at Heslington, and how naïve I was to think that I could manage without them. I have been extremely fortunate to find myself at Seekers, where you have all welcomed me in so readily, so I have had a surrogate community to support me. I think that when I go back to Heslington in June, I am going to find myself pining for Seekers.

My point is that it is very difficult to believe in isolation. We need our community around us to support our faith. The point about Thomas's story is that he does not see Jesus until he is back with his community. That holds true for us too: it is in each other, in our communities, that we see the risen Christ. When we meet together to celebrate the Resurrection, that is where the risen Christ is. When we touch each other in

blessing, that is where we find Jesus. When other people share their stories of faith, that helps us to see Christ in our own lives.

It took touching; feeling the evidence with his own hands, to make Thomas believe. I can really empathise with this, because my very first tangible experience of God involved being touched. I was thirteen, and I was at a big Christian event in London, feeling very distressed, when I suddenly felt someone put their hands on my shoulders, and their touch calmed me and steadied me. There was no one behind me, and I have always believed that those hands belonged to God. I suddenly felt loved, and warm and safe, none of which I had felt minutes before. I've always considered this a very solitary experience, but while I've been thinking about it this week, I've seen it in a new light, and realised that part of what was so special about that day was that I was in community with hundreds of other young Christians. In addition, I was receiving a great deal of care and concern from the members of my own community who were also in London.

Unlike the hands on my shoulders, the touch that made Thomas believe was not a nice touch. I went to Eastern Market yesterday, and found this picture on the top of a pile of etchings. It is titled *The Incredulity of St Thomas*, and it illustrates the passage from John about which we are thinking. Jesus is standing in the middle, looking all muscular and pose-y, with nice delicate little marks on his hands and his feet and a neat little scratch on his ribs. Thomas is looking quite curious, and sort of poking at Jesus' side. Now, I do not know how you imagine it, but I cannot see that a body that had been through crucifixion would look quite so perfect and undamaged. The wounds that Thomas wanted to touch were going to be big, bruised, bloody holes, not neat little puncture marks like an ear piercing.

I fell over this week and grazed my hand. It's a fairly minor injury, but it's pretty close to the site where the nails

would have pierced Jesus' wrists, and I can tell you that there is absolutely no way that I would let anyone poke it about. I am not even that happy about touching it myself. Nevertheless, Jesus is prepared for Thomas to put his fingers into the holes that the nails and the spear have made, in order to help him to believe. I don't think it's especially clear in the gospel whether or not Thomas actually does put his hand in the wounds, but what matters is that Jesus is willing to let him. Jesus is prepared to expose his wounds, open them up to scrutiny, and hold them out for the possibility of yet more pain, because it will help Thomas to believe. Thomas does. 'My Saviour and my God,' he says.

Part of seeing the risen Christ in our communities is letting other people touch our vulnerable places, our scars, in order to help them believe, to see where God has carried out healing in our lives. As part of my training to be a preacher, at some point over the next year, I will have to tell my faith story to all the other preachers in the district. That is about fifty people, most of them older men who I do not know very well, if at all. I've been worrying about this ever since I realised I was going to have to do it, but over the last few weeks I've come to see that it's really important to share our faith. We should share all of it, not just the nice bits. I have to be willing to hold up my story and say 'this is what happened and this is what God has done for me.' Allowing myself to be vulnerable, and letting the scars that I have acquired on my faith journey be seen is important for me, and it might be important for someone else, on their own journey to hear about it.

At the School of Christian Living on Tuesday night, Margery gave us the meditation, and as part of that, she talked about how we tend to look at the concept of 'gift' as if a gift were simply a skill or a talent. While that is true, it excludes the possibility that a gift can be something less tangible, and perhaps less pleasant. Sometimes our vulnerabilities are

our gifts, and both to us, and to the people around us who are called to respond to them.

I share a house with a couple called Rick and Bec, and Bec suffers from ME, which is an illness rather like Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. It is a horrible condition, and Bec ends up spending most of her time in bed feeling pretty rubbish. I think she would probably poke me in the eye if I suggested that her illness was a gift, but when I see what it brought forth in Rick, it feels as if it could be. Rick has always been a very lovely, sweet man, but looking after Bec has brought out something extremely tender and gentle in him. It also forced him to become rather more practical than he was when I first met him. In that sense, Bec's illness has been a gift, it inspired growth in Rick in a way that has been very moving to watch. It brought home to me that sometimes our opportunities to grow are not all that fun, but they are important.

I think the idea that faith can be a real struggle, and not that much fun is set out very helpfully in the story of Jacob wrestling with God, which I was talking about with Jesse on Easter Sunday. I think that image, of a person physically wrestling with the Lord, is a profoundly helpful one when we are thinking about doubt. It reminds us that our faith in God is not always going to come easily, that sometimes it is going to be a fight. However, the reassuring bit is God's sanction of it. When Jacob refuses to stop struggling with him, God says, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome." Israel is the name that Jacob's whole nation ends up with. Moreover, it seems as if through that process of naming, God is honouring the struggles that we all have with our faith and with our sense of belief. What God is not saying is that our way will always be nice and smooth and He will be there beside us stroking our heads. Sometimes, we are going to have a fight on our hands. That is okay. Although Jesus says that those who

believe without seeing are blessed, at no point does he say that Thomas is less blessed, or not blessed, because his journey of faith was harder than that of the other disciples.

On Maundy Thursday, I came to my first ever foot-washing service at Seekers. I find being touched at church extremely difficult because when I was a teenager I learned to equate that with sexual abuse. Therefore, I came through the door feeling full of trepidation. However, what I realised that night is actually a good metaphor for what I am trying to say about Thomas's story. I had to take my socks off and expose my feet, and feel vulnerable. Everyone else in the room did it too. We all opened up; we all made ourselves vulnerable; however we were feeling, we were gentle with each other's vulnerabilities. I think that is where we really see the risen Christ, when we allow ourselves to see and to be seen, and to see the work of God in each other's lives, as they see the work of God in us.

Amen