

# EASTER DOUBT

## Introducing the Readings

It's only through the post-Easter season that we read John's Gospel regularly.

This Gospel is regarded by scholars as quite late – 80-100 years after Jesus's death. It's a very stylised piece of work, apparently designed to be read as part of the liturgy rather than as any kind of historical record.

We noted that Luke is primarily theological in his writing – John (whoever the author actually is, we don't know) is even more theological, using long "teaching" slots in which he puts speeches in to Jesus's mouth – that don't really sound like Jesus at all.

The story we have today seems to be written precisely for this Sunday after Easter – "Low Sunday" – a time of anti-climax after the highs of Easter Day. It's about "keeping faith" in the post-Easter season, in which Thomas has a big part.

There's a translation issue in this piece, from Greek to English: where "believe" occurs, think "have faith". We'll come back to that.

And our first reading comes from the book of the Acts of Apostles, regarded by scholars as coming from the same author as Luke's Gospel – in fact, this writing is usually known as "Luke-Acts".

So the interests are similar to those of Luke: encouraging the followers of Jesus to **act out** the gospel story. In this case, the emphasis is on being "witnesses" – that is, "witnesses to faith".

## Introduction

I struggle with many so-called Christian beliefs. They produce more questions for me than answers.

Do *you* have questions?

Do you sometimes wonder what these beliefs are all about?

Or want to argue with what's being said?

I find often that *doubt* is stronger than *belief*.

### 1. Easter Faithing

In this Easter season we traditionally reflect on what it is to be believers, to be people of faith.

Easter's main theme, from this perspective, is *re-creating faith* building on the hope and love expressed in the stories we've heard during Easter itself.

Thomas's story comes this week because it's a faith story. The Greek word behind *ōbelieveō* is the same word we translate as *ōfaithō*.

In English, we don't have a verb for faith, so instead of talking about *faithing* or being a *faither*, we use *believing* and *believer*.

But these days *believe* suggests something we think is *true* or factual, telling it the way it is or ideally, something that can be *proved*.

Thomas certainly wanted *proof* in this story, proof that this really was Jesus, and not some impersonator or hallucination.

Note that Jesus moved beyond that, however, suggesting that proof - seeing - is not necessary to believe, to have faith.

The result, though, is that we see the most faithful Christians as those

that believe in things like the literal resuscitation of Jesus, even though we can't prove this actually happened.

That kind of belief is still so tied to *facts* that any suggestion that resurrection might be a metaphor for hope and new life, or a way of talking about the renewed energy of the disciples, any talk like that is seen as a complete denial of belief. Such ideas are understood as unchristian, unbelieving, lacking in faith.

That, however, is not the biblical view.

Until quite recently, what is true and worth believing in was not tied to facts or proofs but went deeper, pointing to what is important in human living.

To do this, we do better to go to the words for faith rather than belief. I am a *faither*, rather than someone who believes certain things. And what's important about keeping Easter alive is our *faith*, not what we believe the things that happened back then.

## 2. Easter Doubting

However, we often look for *certainty* as a basis for that faith. The story of Thomas - doubting Thomas - points out, on the other hand, that *doubt* has a part to play in our ongoing reflection on Easter.

Often it is said that if you're not certain about your faith, if it's a bit wobbly, then you're not really a person of faith. I am saying that that view is not only unhelpful, but is a misunderstanding of the nature of faith.

Look at it this way: Abraham is often seen in the Bible as the great example of a person of faith. So important is he that three of the world's main religions - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - all look to Abraham as the foundation to their faith.

And what is it about Abraham that marks his faith? It's that he set out,

not knowing where he was going. It was not his certainty, his sense of knowing, but precisely his *lack* of knowing, his lack of certainty, that marks the greatness of Abraham's faith.

If we think we *know* what the depth of truth is, if we are *certain* about what we believe and have faith in, then actually that's not *faith* at all. Faith is faith when we hold onto our commitments without any certainty.

Certainty, instead of being central to faith, is really the denial of faith.

And so doubt is not the destroyer of faith, but a core ingredient in it. If we cannot ask questions of our faith, then that faith is weak, superficial, reliant on foundations that are not faithful.

This Easter period is a great time to be asking questions, exploring the ideas and symbols of our Christian faith. It's appropriate in this season to be examining the stories of faith, to be thinking about them, to ask new questions of them, to let our doubts come to the surface.

In many ways, we can just as readily think of "Easter faith" as being "Easter doubt".

## **Conclusion**

So, as we move through this Easter season, let's be open to our doubts about the stories.

Let's take part in a questioning faith. I think that's a proper part of Easter faith.