

Sermon 2nd Sunday of Easter 2025

G.K. Chesterton once wrote: ‘Fairy tales do not give the child (their) first idea of (the) bogey (man). What fairy tales give the child is (their) first clear idea of the possible defeat of (the) bogey (man). The baby has known the dragon intimately ever since (they) had an imagination. What the fairy tale provides...is a St. George to kill the dragon.’¹

I love this quote. From a very early age, most human beings quickly learn that there are bad things out there in the world, people and things which wish to harm us. That evil exists in the world is not confined to fairytales – it is a reality. But the overthrow of evil, in real life as in fairy tales, is a solid possibility.

Our Gospel today tells us of how Jesus’ disciples were cowering in a locked room, afraid of what was going on out there into the world. Jesus had been killed on the Cross and now had mysteriously returned from the dead. They must have been terrified. Into this situation walks the risen Christ, who brings peace into their midst. In that moment, he shows them that the powers of evil have not won. And Christ was certainly dragged through the breach by the powers of evil. They might have killed him on the Cross, but Christ is more powerful than death. In his returning, Jesus shows us that it is possible for sin, death, evil, the

¹ Pronouns changed to be more inclusive. G.K. Chesterton in Sarah Clarkson, *Reclaiming Quiet: Cultivating a Life of Holy Attention* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2024), p.157.

devil, to be defeated. There are Roman legions out there who will crucify you; there are those who will humiliate you; you are going to die one day; but Christ shows us that all of these can, and more importantly will, be defeated through the power of God.

There are those who would want to say that the Resurrection of Christ from the dead is the same as a fairytale: a nice story which gives us hope, but completely fictitious. However, those of us who are Christians have a very different view: we believe that Jesus existed as an historical person, had the divinity of God in him, and rose again from the dead.

That doesn't mean there is no room for doubt about all this in our lives. Today is often commonly called "Thomas Sunday", as the Gospel includes the story of Thomas refusing to believe that Christ had come back from the dead – 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.' Christ then turns up, allowing Thomas to examine his wounds.

We often see doubt as being a negative thing, but there is another dimension. Many biblical scholars have argued that Thomas is portrayed positively rather than negatively for questioning and doubting in our Gospel reading today. This is a commendable attribute in many circumstances. In our own age of AI and deep fakes, where photos and videos can be generated without even the slightest hint of truth about them, we all need to foster

within ourselves healthy doubting and questioning. An Orthodox commentary I read to prepare for today's sermon says: 'The doubt of Thomas is described in the Church hymns as "blessed," for it was not a doubt of resistance to truth, but one that desperately desired a truthful answer – a "doubt which gave birth to faith" when the answer was revealed.'

Thomas had doubts, and that was OK. It is OK for you and me to have doubts too. St Thomas doubted long before you did. Candidly, any attempt by us to prove or disprove that mysterious and wonderful claim that Christ rose from the dead, whether historically or scientifically, will be futile.

But there are signs. The spread of Christianity directly after Jesus' death and Resurrection has something intrinsically strange about it. In today's world, you can spread an idea or promote a leader extremely quickly through modern communication methods, such as the internet, social media, emails, and so on. Things can go viral overnight, and people can spread information from the comfort of their sofa.

Those women and men Jesus sent out into the world had none of this. To spread the news of Jesus, they had to physically leave their homes and go to extreme lengths to tell people of Christ's resurrection from the dead. The apostles, disciples and their families had to leave behind everything – their jobs, homes, security – to make the Gospel known.

Furthermore, these were not powerful people. By all accounts, historical records show that for the first three hundred years of Christianity's existence, Christians were largely from the lower echelons of society, those who lacked power, money and status.

To add to that, early Christians were ferociously persecuted. Out of the twelve apostles, all bar one were tortured and killed for teaching about Jesus. Persecution of Christians didn't stop in the Roman Empire until three hundred years after Jesus' lifetime, when the Emperor Constantine happened to be convinced that there must be some truth in what Christians were holding onto and teaching. Prior to that, thousands of Christians were killed for their faith, and would have found living in their society difficult to say the least. It would have been easier for them, all things considered, to keep quiet and live an easy life in their hometowns. These people had nothing, it seems, to gain from going out there and speaking about Christ. People do leave home to improve themselves, find new friends or lovers, or to make money. The disciples of Christ had very little chance of making money when the world was hostile to them.

These people did leave their homes and home countries though, and they kept speaking about Jesus and telling others how he had come back from the dead, despite all the above. This tells me something – they must have really believed what they were telling people, and to really believe, they must have seen what they said they

saw. I don't think they would have risked so much in their lives over a hunch – to do what those first apostles and disciples did, must have meant that they had truly experienced something amazing. Not only Christ healing people, casting out demons, and so on - I think there are clear signs and markers that they actually saw Christ come back from the dead.

So, it is OK, like Thomas, to doubt. But the apostles of Christ did not put their necks on the line, risking everything they had (even their lives) over nothing. This suggests they must have seen something. And if that something which they saw – Christ's resurrection from the dead – happened, this has huge implications for you and me. For one, it shows us that although there's much in our world of which we are afraid of, we have a blazing hope that those things of which we are afraid can be, and will be, overthrown by God in time.

We are those who have to believe without necessarily seeing, although you may well have seen God at work in the world. At some point in our journey, we have to make a decision about whether we believe in what the Gospels say or not. A thousand doubts do not disprove something, and even if we personally cannot make sense of the Christian faith completely in our own minds, at some point we have just got to get on with our faith. 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you' Jesus says. He says the same to us today.

If you still think this is a mere fairytale, fair enough. For me, there is something much more precious being told to us in accounts like today's Gospel than we can possibly imagine. A fairytale can inspire us to strive against evil in our lives. But our Christian faith provides us with the tools and reality in our actual lives to make the downfall of evil in our world possible, through the mighty acts of Christ Jesus.

The late Pope Francis' final sermon from the balcony of St Peter's Basilica seems to distil what we have signed up for in our Resurrection faith in Christ: 'Brothers and sisters', he said, 'this is the greatest hope of our life: we can live this poor, fragile and wounded existence clinging to Christ, because he has conquered death, he conquers our darkness, and he will conquer the shadows of the world, to make us live with him in joy, for ever. Christ is present everywhere, he dwells among us, he hides himself and reveals himself even today in the sisters and brothers we meet along the way, in the most ordinary and unpredictable situations of our lives. He is alive and is with us always, shedding the tears of those who suffer and adding to the beauty of life through the small acts of love carried out by each of us. Sisters, brothers, in the wonder of the Easter faith...we can say: 'With you, O Lord, everything is new. With you, everything begins again.' Amen.