



Opening Responses for Eastertide

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

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'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

Do you think that the opposite of faith is doubt or certainty? Can you explain your answer?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

Glory to you, O God:
you raised Jesus from the grave,
bringing us victory over death and giving us eternal life.

Glory to you, O Christ:
for us and for our salvation you overcame death,
and opened the gate to everlasting life.

Glory to you, O Holy Spirit:
you lead us into the truth, show us the way,
and breathe new life into us.

**Glory to you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
now and forever. Amen**

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 133

Behold how good and pleasant it is
to dwell together in unity.

It is like the precious oil upon the head,
running down upon the beard,
**Even on Aaron's beard,
running down upon the collar of his clothing.**

It is like the dew of Hermon
running down upon the hills of Zion.
**For there the Lord has promised his blessing:
even life for evermore.**

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.
Amen

Prayers of Renewal

Jesus Christ is risen from the dead,
opening the way to everlasting life,
both in the here-and-now, and throughout all that is to come.
Let us therefore bring to God those things in need of renewal:

We bring to you those things for which we are sorry:
Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the times we've failed to love one another:
Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the burdens we carry and sorrows we bear:
Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the injustices and oppression in our world:
Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the failings and disunity of your Church:
Restore us and heal us.

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of new beginnings,
of love stronger than even death,
you set us free from the past, to flourish in the future.
Thank you that you forgive us, restore us,
and breathe new life into us.

Amen

Reading John 20:19 – 31

Sermon

Of the various disciples we meet in the pages of the New Testament and the Gospel of John in particular, Thomas gets some of the worst press. Many of us will have used the expression ‘Doubting Thomas’, to refer to someone who refuses to believe something we have tried to convince them of, or who’s wrongly doubted somebody else. Yet, I cannot deny that Thomas is actually one of my favourite characters from the Gospels, and not just because he will state what others are thinking but dare not say, such as the disciples’ fears on the way to Jerusalem. Not only does he voice the most profound confession of faith in the Bible, recognising Jesus as ‘Lord and God’ (John 20:28), but his refusal to believe those extraordinary claims his friends were making about the resurrection without seeing the evidence first, has always appealed to me. He exemplifies what theologians often term a *hermeneutic of suspicion* – a willingness to question and examine what he is told rather than taking everything at face value. Thus, he offers an important example for us today.

We live in turbulent times, in which integrity in public life is frequently in short supply, and cruelties to and scapegoating of various groups – from refugees and asylum-seekers, to those claiming benefits and trans people – are propagated for political gain. As a result, utilising media-savviness and critical thinking skills is essential, as all media

outlets have their particular agendas, and the way groups of people and current events are presented isn’t neutral. Whether to generate outrage as a strategy to boost readership, or to appeal to prejudices perceived to be held by particular sections of the electorate, the way language is used, statistics are presented and people are described is deliberate and purposeful. To give an example, it is not accidental that when a member of a maligned subset of society breaks the law, accounts of their actions use various techniques to imply that, rather than reflecting upon them alone, their behaviours are representative of that whole minority. So it is that extreme instances of benefit fraud are presented as typical of folks out of work, the religious extremism of a few is projected as intrinsic to Islam, and the crimes of a refugee or a trans woman are used to demonise all such people. As a result, possessing a hermeneutic of suspicion is vital if we are to make any sense of the agendas behind the headlines.

Given this background, being like Thomas and questioning what we are told is no bad thing. His willingness to examine those things that others took for granted sets him apart from the crowd, and therefore reveals an important principle: seeking evidence and asking difficult questions is not some bad thing, but a sign of mature and thoughtful discipleship alert to the complexities of this messy society we share. We tend, as Malcolm Gladwell outlines in his intriguing book *Talking to Strangers*, to default to truth. In other words, we typically assume that other people are essentially honest, and we need considerable evidence to make us change our minds. Gladwell explains how this plays out in human inability to reliably discern if somebody is truthful or not if there is a mismatch between their intentions and behaviour, and in the ways everything from financial corruption to sexual abuse have come to be overlooked in institutions. Now, this does not mean that we need to treat everybody we meet with constant suspicion as society couldn’t function if we did, but it does mean that following in the footsteps of Thomas, and not taking everything we see and hear

at face value, is important for communities to be able to flourish and for justice to be seen in practice.

The man Thomas and his fellow disciples had followed from Galilee to his death upon that cross just outside Jerusalem declared himself to be the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). Jesus embodied in his very personhood the truth that affirms the value of all of creation in the eyes of God, and particular the fact that there is no such thing as a person who does not matter to God. Yet, in the ways which our world actually functions, this isn't always reflected. In recent weeks, we have seen plans to send asylum-seekers to Rwanda resurfaced, while at the same time dismantling legal and safe routes to come to the UK. We are told that this is necessary to address the dangerous Channel crossings making a fortune for people smugglers and polls show that some see this policy as positive. However, this defaulting on the UK's international obligations to refugees does not reflect the value of those forced to leave everything familiar behind by conflicts and by climate change, poverty and persecution, in the sight of God. We should not be afraid to ask tough questions and to demand hard evidence in the face of such political claims, because injustices take hold and flourish when good people turn a blind eye to them. Given my own experiences as a trans man, I know how this feels...

So, I would like to encourage you to be more like Thomas, who was not afraid to question and to evaluate and to love God with his mind, but who also recognised the risen Jesus, and made such a profound declaration of faith as 'my Lord and my God'. It is because of Christ, and in particular because of his resurrection, that we can trust God's promise to renew the heavens and the earth in the new creation will indeed come to fruition. This means the direction of everything God has made is ultimately that of Love, and so when we encounter that which does not reflect this love, we should ask tough questions, and challenge assertions, as an act of faith. After all, faith and doubt are not opposites, but faith and certainty are, and there is nothing that's

more dangerous than being certain that denying the value of others is right. So, be more Thomas; the world needs it. Amen

Recommended Resource of the Week

Prof. Alister McGrath's 2021 work *Through a Glass Darkly* explores the relationship between faith and doubt in science.

Prayers of Intercession

Let us pray:

God of questions and doubts and wondering,
we bring our prayers to you today
as people who know we don't have all the answers,
but who trust in your goodness, and hope in your promises.
God of resurrection, **bring new life, we pray.**

To those living in places of war and conflict,
whose faith in you has been shattered by bombs and hatred,
God of resurrection, **bring new life, we pray.**

To those who are prisoners of conscious,
and those who struggle to hold onto you in dark times,
God of resurrection, **bring new life, we pray.**

To those who find their rights and liberties threatened,
and who face persecution simply for being themselves,
God of resurrection, **bring new life, we pray.**

To those trapped in cycles of poverty, violence or despair,
for whom the light of your love flickers faintly in the distance,
God of resurrection, **bring new life, we pray.**

To those who are unwell in body, mind or spirit,
and all who are feeling lonely, anxious or isolated today,
God of resurrection, **bring new life, we pray.**

In a time of quiet and stillness, we bring our own prayers
for those we know who need your light and hope...

Lord's Prayer

Final Prayer – Collect for the Second Sunday of Easter

Faithful God, the strength of all who believe
and the hope of those who doubt;
may we, who have not seen, have faith
and receive the fullness of Christ's blessing;
who is alive and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Blessing

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

May the blessing of God,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
fill us with resurrection hope,
and remain upon us and all whom we love and pray for,
now and throughout eternity. **Amen**