

Resurrection Reality

Over the course of many years, I have heard many doubting Thomas's saying they were able to believe in a creator God, but were quite unable to believe in a resurrected Jesus, the Son of God. Come to think of it, they were more than doubters, they were deniers.

And Thomas, in doubting, was denying the resurrection of Jesus unless he could touch Jesus' body. It was not even a case of seeing is believing as with the other disciples, it was a case of seeing, *touching* and believing.

Those who have studied the culture of the Middle East tell us that secrecy, deception and lying are so common not only in the present but also in the past, that every native to that culture maintains a healthy scepticism about everything. Even "seeing is believing" was a doubtful saying in that culture. The gospels remind us of this cultural situation when we remember that Jesus uses the saying "I tell you the truth" on many occasions.

Fake news, or propaganda as we tend to know it, was a major prop to the regime of Nazi Germany in the 1920s, 30s and 40s. The tragedy for Germany was that many of their natives were not sceptics, but they were believers in what they heard.

Today, as non-Middle East natives, we would understand the Middle East culture of scepticism when we are bombarded with reports of fake news; and probably fake news of fake news. The President of the United States tries to use fake news to enhance his political position. Many have become sceptics in this regard, so many can understand scepticism as a cultural standpoint of Middle Eastern culture, especially of that culture in Jesus' time on earth.

So Thomas was not unusual in being sceptical about the claims of his fellow disciples of seeing the resurrected Lord. For them, seeing was believing, mainly because it was all of them who had seen the Lord at the same time. It was not just the evidence of an individual. The earlier witness of Mary Magdalene, followed by Peter and John, had been

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sceptically received by the remainder of the disciples. But in the earlier part of today's gospel reading, "The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord." Seeing was believing. No more doubting.

We are told that Thomas was absent on that occasion. But a week later, he was in the room with the others and Jesus came and stood among them. And he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side." He then adds significantly, "Stop doubting and believe." And Thomas, apparently without touching Jesus' wounds, responds, "My Lord and my God!"

For the disciples, the resurrected Jesus was reality. Seeing was believing. As Jesus said to them, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Resurrection reality. We have not seen and yet have believed." Haven't we? Or are we doubters too? Or maybe we are doubters sometimes and believers at other times. Where are we in all this?

Spiritual awareness is a variable quality. Some have it in abundance. Others hardly at all. Our western culture does NOT encourage the spiritual realm. Our culture is based on rationalisation, on a scientific basis. To a large extent, the spiritual realm has been extinguished from our culture, and is regarded with great scepticism. It is doubted as reality.

But other cultures in our world recognise spirituality to a very great extent. As I have mentioned in previous sermons, the vast majority of other cultures in our world experience altered states of consciousness as normal and routine. They glimpse an alternate reality that is richer than the reality they experience most often. Most of the Mediterranean societies investigated by researchers have had these same experiences, including Hebrews, Greeks and ancient Egyptians. Western society in general seems to have blocked out this normal human capability.

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However, dreams are one familiar and common experience of alternate reality in western culture. Dreams aren't bounded by time. From the dreamer's perspective, the dead relate to the living, and experiences separated by time in waking consciousness flow together. Visions are another experience of alternate reality mentioned often in the Bible. It is culturally possible to include appearances of the resurrected Jesus in the category of alternate reality, or putting it another way, states of altered consciousness.

So what are we to make of the resurrected Jesus accounts in the Gospels? Since the experience of alternate reality is normal and common in Mediterranean societies, it is possible that those who saw the risen Jesus experienced him in an altered state of consciousness. They caught a glimpse of risen life, a reality that truly exists and includes much more than ordinary human consciousness.

Scientific discovery and putting those good things into our everyday lives has enhanced our living; of that, there can be no doubt. But today's gospel highlights one area of human experience it may have belittled. Rich spiritual dividends may be forthcoming if we were able to regain this gift of God, alternate reality. Perhaps we need to do some Christian daydreaming. Perhaps we need to add some imagination in our areas of Christian understanding. Perhaps our prayers should be more about listening to the Lord rather than telling him of our needs and desires. Perhaps we need to delve deeply into the realms of contemplative prayer. Perhaps we need to do all these things to find for ourselves the real experience of alternate reality and to make it again a normal dimension of human life.

The Anglican Church, in its culture, inherited from its Roman Catholic roots, does attempt to help us discover and live in alternate reality as we worship. The richness you see before you in the embroidered hangings, in the stained glass windows, in the furniture, in the vestments we wear, this richness isn't there to impress with its richness. It is there to enhance that sense of alternate reality if we allow ourselves the chance of rediscovering that area of Christian living experience.

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And there have been times when I, for one, have sensed that alternate reality in this place of St. Peter's. Perhaps you have, too, without realising it! On two occasions now, in recessing from the sanctuary, the final hymn has finished, and Robert has not played any extra tiddily bits, there has been an uncanny silence, a perfect peace in which there has been no sound inside the Church and blessed be, no sound of traffic or of people coming from outside the Church. For me, a holy moment; a brief experience of alternate reality, or an altered state of consciousness.

We need to set aside additional time in order to daydream, read more of the Bible, to pray, to contemplate. We need to be determined to follow the path of enhanced spirituality. It means looking again at what it means to live the Christian life. It means we mean what we say when we acclaim, "Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia!"

No doubting! Jesus Christ lives, risen to new life from the dead, as witnessed by the apostles in the alternate reality of their normal daily lives.

Amen.