

Introduction

I don't know if any of you have had the experience where you were recounting something unusual to a friend or acquaintance and found that they simply don't believe you. *Tell the story of Eamon Holmes and the penguin. Mention my own problems with the kangaroo in the snow.* I've also been on the unbelieving end. I remember when Princess Diana died I was taking the 8.0 O' clock communion and arrived at church not having listened to a radio to be told by one of the congregation that Diana was dead. I confess that my first reaction was "Oh she's misunderstood. That can't be true. She's confused! It wasn't until several people had told me the same news and I'd seen the pictures on the television that it really sunk in.

On the other side of the coin we also usually believe what we see, even if it is an illusion. I remember in the sixties (when I was very young) The TV programme Panorama did a wonderful April fool about spaghetti farmers in Italy. They showed pictures of the spaghetti apparently growing on trees. Many people's reaction was "Well I never realised that spaghetti grew on trees".

Belief is an interesting thing. What is necessary for belief? On that first Easter day the disciples saw various things that pointed to the fact that Jesus had risen from the dead. The empty tomb alone wasn't sufficient to make them believe for certain that Jesus had risen again. It pointed to the fact that something amazing had happened but in itself wasn't certain proof. Luke tells us that having seen the empty tomb and the grave clothes Peter went away wondering. John tells us that the other disciple (who we believe to be John) saw and believed though he doesn't say exactly what he believed. The women's testimony wasn't enough. The men didn't believe them and had to go and see for themselves

It was a personal encounter with the risen Lord that convinced the disciples that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead. Mary had been deeply distressed by the empty tomb and was unable to understand its significance other than that someone had

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stolen the body - she needed to personally meet Jesus, hear his voice and hold onto him to absorb the amazing fact of his resurrection. In our Gospel reading we heard that Jesus came to the upper room and stood amongst the disciples. He stood amongst them, spoke to them and showed them the proof of his suffering and death. It was as they both saw him and heard his voice that they recognised that this was indeed their Lord and master and that he had truly risen from the grave. John tells us "they were overjoyed when they saw the Lord."

But Jesus wasn't there simply to reassure his disciples, to cheer them up after the traumatic events of the past few days. He wasn't simply popping up to let them know that he was in fact all right. He came with a purpose - to give them a commission and to equip them for it. He said to them, "as the father has sent me, I am sending you" He had been sent by his Father to proclaim the Good News of God's kingdom; to proclaim healing for the sick, sight for the blind release for the captives, forgiveness for sinners - and Jesus was in his turn sending his disciples out to proclaim the same thing.

In order for them to proclaim the Good news they needed two things, one was to be equipped by the Holy Spirit for the task, and the second was to be certain of what they were proclaiming. Jesus resurrection from the dead was the heart of the good news. It was his resurrection that ultimately defeated the devil, which won for us forgiveness for our sins and that brought healing to our damaged human nature.

When he wrote his first letter to the early Christian church John started by stating his credentials. They are that he had seen, heard and touched Jesus that he had seen him both in life, death and resurrection and was able to testify to the truth. He had seen Jesus both in his earthly ministry and after his resurrection and was able, therefore to be a reliable witness. He could preach the good news because he knew it to be true.

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It often surprises me that we are so harsh in our judgement of Thomas. Doubting Thomas we call him as if he should have believed in the resurrection. Why should he have believed? It is clear from the gospel accounts that despite the fact that Jesus had preached on more than one occasion that he would not only die but rise again from the dead none of the disciples were actually expecting that to happen. For them Jesus' death was the end of a dream. They were devastated and certainly not expecting to meet with Jesus that first Easter day.

Thomas's disbelief at a very unlikely happening was exactly the same as the radio listeners to Eamon Holmes seeing a penguin at the airport and my friend's reaction when I'd seen a kangaroo in a snow filled field. "It's not possible!" Because they hadn't been able to verify it for themselves they weren't going to believe us - and neither was Thomas.

Thomas wanted to see Jesus for himself, to see the proof of his suffering and to touch him. He wanted to know beyond doubt that Jesus' resurrection was real. That this wasn't a hallucination or a ghost (or an April fool!) but that Jesus had physically risen from the dead. In fact he wasn't asking for any more than Jesus had given the other disciples. He had spoken to them and shown them the proof of his suffering. He had shown them clearly that this was a real human body in front of them even if it could come through locked doors. Thomas wanted a more substantial proof - he wanted to touch Jesus' wounds - but was that so unreasonable? For the rest of his life he would be able to preach Jesus' resurrection without the shadow of a doubt and be able to back up his testimony with the fact that he had actually seen the proof for himself.

Thomas' encounter with the risen Lord not only convinced him of the truth of the resurrection but showed him that Jesus was in truth his Lord and his God. It is this truth that Jesus sent his disciples out to proclaim. His resurrection and his appearances to his disciples after his death would have meant nothing if they had not born witness to that fact. His whole purpose in appearing before them was so that they could preach Christ, not only crucified but risen. They were to bear

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witness to the ends of the earth that Jesus Christ died to save us and rose from the dead to win eternal life for us. If the disciples had kept this fact a secret Jesus ministry would have been for nothing at all.

In order to bear witness they were given Jesus' authority over sin and the gift of the Holy Spirit to equip them for their mission. John tells us that he has recorded these events, not only Jesus' earthly ministry but also his death and resurrection, so that his readers might believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and, by believing, have eternal life in Jesus' name.

That commission has been passed on to us as Jesus disciples. We too are called to proclaim the Good News of Jesus' death and resurrection. We have not seen it personally for ourselves. We haven't had the privilege of being able to see Jesus' wounds and touch them for ourselves but we have Jesus' blessing. He said "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed". Our experience of belief is exactly the same as that of those first disciples. They were only able to proclaim the risen Christ after they had personally encountered him - and we will only be able to proclaim the risen Christ if we have encountered him personally ourselves. We may not have seen him but we can certainly have met him.

I remember, as clearly as if it were yesterday the day I first encountered the risen Christ. It was 47 years ago when I was sixteen. I had been taught all my life that Jesus had died and had risen again but that fact had an unreality about it. It was something I knew - but it had no actual effect on my life. It made no difference to the way I lived or to the things that were important to me. It was almost irrelevant because it didn't seem real. Then I met someone to whom the risen Christ was a living breathing reality and their testimony convinced me that Jesus was alive and cared very deeply for me. That was a turning point for me and there hasn't been a moment since when the risen Christ hasn't been a part of my life - even though there have been times when I have turned away and have tried to exclude him.

In his letter John tells his readers, "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete". It is as we proclaim the risen Christ to others that they too can meet with him and will have true fellowship with us. Thomas was excluded from the fellowship of the disciples after that first Easter evening. They had shared in something that he had missed. They knew something that he didn't and they were certain of something that he could not believe. It was only when he himself encountered the risen Jesus that he was again fully able to share in fellowship with the others.

It is up to us whether the people that we know and love, those we live amongst and work with, encounter the risen Lord Jesus. They will only know about the reality of the resurrection if we make it known in our lives and by our testimony. It will be as we present the risen Christ to them that they will encounter him and believe. We may not be able to show them Jesus in person or enable them to put their hands in his wounds but we can show them his presence at work in our lives. Jesus gives us his Holy Spirit to show his living presence to others. It is as the fruits and gifts of the Spirit are seen in us that others will be able to encounter the risen Jesus. It is as we worship Jesus as our Lord and God, and obey him in the way that we live, that others will be able to see the reality of the risen Christ and encounter him for themselves.