

2nd SUNDAY OF EASTER Year B

In C. S. Lewis' book *The Screwtape Letters* a senior devil suggests to a junior devil that a Christian soul can be brought down by a war of attrition. "It is so hard for these creatures to persevere," he says. Routine adversity, the decay of hope, recurring illness, despair at not overcoming temptation – all slowly wear down a person's faith. Best of all, says Screwtape, is a good dose of shocking "reality" such as violence or sudden death. That can make the Christian feel "that all his religion has been a fantasy". In other words, make them **doubt**.

Lewis was writing from personal experience. When his wife Joy died of cancer he reeled from the shock. He considered, for a while, that his faith was "a house of cards." "Are the things I am believing only a dream?" he wrote, "or do I only dream that I believe them?" Or, as the rock singer and campaigner Bono once said, "people expect you as a believer to have all the answers, when really all you get is another set of questions." In other words, doubt is not a rare experience. There's a lot of it about, even among Christians. There are few of us who haven't at some point questioned whether God and our faith are real, or whether what we read in scripture is true. But, unlike Lewis and Bono, we may not often be willing to admit it.

Thomas, the New Testament's famous doubter, did admit it. He demanded concrete evidence to support what he considered to be a preposterous claim – that Jesus Christ was alive and well. It went clean against his own experience. He'd seen Jesus tortured almost to death by brutal Roman soldiers even before he was crucified. Thomas had seen a Roman soldier make sure Jesus was dead by plunging his sword into his side. He knew that Jesus was sealed in a rock tomb with a half-ton slab blocking the entrance. Dead people just don't walk out of places like that. We can understand his scepticism – given everything he had seen and experienced, why **should** he believe what he was being told.

But Thomas, in his distressed and confused state of mind, missed things he should have noted, After all, he'd seen Jesus do "impossible" things like raise people from the dead. If anything is impossible – **that** is !! So it shouldn't have been beyond the bounds of possibility that God's power could have raised God's own Son. Thomas had also grown to know and trust the other apostles during the time they'd been together. But now he wouldn't trust their word – and he couldn't see that they too had been

grieving and would never have played such a tasteless joke to deceive him about Jesus being alive.

With the benefit of hindsight we might be tempted to say “silly man.” But that’s just what Jesus **didn’t** say when he finally revealed himself to Thomas. Jesus was gentler with the doubter than we might be. He didn’t tell him off. He understood. He just showed him the evidence, invited him to believe – and Thomas was converted.

Faith, after all, isn’t certainty. The New Testament reassures us that we are held firmly and lovingly in the hands of our unchanging God. When our own faith is shaken we can help ourselves. Memory is one of God’s greatest gifts to us. In times of doubt it helps to look back to when God was real to us. We can look back to the biblical records, and the stories of the saints, and know that they weren’t all entirely mistaken. The truth is out there, even if it’s not inside us with any conviction. It’s not easy to keep things in perspective – but it’s not impossible either. The risen Jesus is there to reassure us that God is present in every circumstance of our lives. Let’s take what we **do** know into the world, and help others not to doubt but to believe.