**Acts 4.32-35**

32 Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. 33With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. 34There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. 35They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

**1 John 1.1-2.2**

1We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— 2this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— 3we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. 4We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. 6If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; 7but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. 8If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

2My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; 2and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

**John 20.19-end**

19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ 20After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ 22When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. 23If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’

24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord.’ But he said to them, ‘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.’

26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ 27Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.’ 28Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’ 29Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Let me take you back - for a few moments - to 2005. In the Ataturk Stadium in Istanbul, it’s the final of the European Football Champions League, and a packed crowd (remember those?) is watching Liverpool being slaughtered by AC Milan. At half time, the Italians are 3-0 up and looking unbeatable. And then somehow, a miracle happens. After the interval, Liverpool stage an incredible comeback. Scoring 3 goals in 6 minutes to draw level, they dig in for the rest of the half, plus 30 minutes of extra time, and finally triumph in the penalty shootout to take the title. What a moment for the loyal fans who’d followed them all the way across Europe! Pity, then, the handful of Liverpool supporters who left the stadium at the end of the first half, unable to face what seemed inevitable defeat.

I’m reminded of those despairing fans by the story of the disciples, which reaches its climax in today’s gospel reading. They’ve followed team Jesus through thick and thin, seeing him repeatedly defeat sickness, ignorance and prejudice. But those were only the qualifying rounds. The final takes place in Jerusalem, and at first all seems possible. The enthusiastic crowds of Palm Sunday give the disciples hope that Jesus is on the way to establishing God’s kingdom in clouds of glory. And then, just when he’s facing his fiercest opposition, he suddenly appears to lose all his appetite for fight. The disciples watch in horror as he submits to false accusations, a mockery of a trial, brutal death. They scatter, in fear and disbelief. It’s only later, in the episode we hear in today’s reading, that they begin to understand that what they thought was the end of this epic contest was in fact only half time. Jesus is revealed as the ultimate victor, for whom death itself is only a route to a new and glorious life.

Just as the absent Liverpool fans might have needed a video replay to be convinced of the final score, the disciples also initially find the news impossible to believe. Last Sunday we heard of the confusion of the women who saw the evidence of the empty tomb. Now, as a larger group reassembles that same evening, Jesus appears among them to give them visible proof that he is truly alive. But Thomas – the latest arrival of all – still can’t take the other disciples’ word for it. To be certain, he needs to touch and see for himself.

When Jesus appears again, a week later, he understands this need without prompting. He invites Thomas to satisfy his senses, to lay his doubts to rest and believe. Then he goes on, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” Is this a reproach to Thomas? Or does it point us (those who weren’t there to see for ourselves) to look more closely at the scene? If we do, we might notice three important details which come to light through Thomas’s questioning.

First the physical reality of Jesus’s body shows him to be a genuine living person, not a ghost or a hallucination. The scars on his hands and the wound in his side reveal that he is the crucified one, not some impersonator. Thomas’s insistence on seeing and touching the resurrected body of Jesus confirms – in a very physical way - the evidence of all those who witnessed it. The vital importance of this personal testimony runs through all today’s readings but finds its clearest expression in the letter from John: “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.”

Second, Thomas’s focus on Jesus’s wounds underlines that even after defeating death, Jesus retains the disfigurement of his crucifixion. His resurrected body carries the scars that tell the story of his suffering – reminding us that God is at work in the bleakest moments of all our lives, transforming pain into the material of eternity.

And third, having confronted his doubts, Thomas sees something that has been hidden from them all. From the moment Mary Magdelene found the tomb empty on Easter morning, it was clear that something extraordinary was being revealed about Jesus. But Thomas is the first to put it into words: “My Lord and my God!” This is the only time in the gospels that anyone addresses Jesus this way. His followers have recognised him as a teacher, as a prophet, and even as the Messiah, but no one has yet understood that he is God.

So Thomas’s persistence gives us three insights: practical, physical confirmation of the evidence reported by the other disciples; the assurance that pain and suffering can themselves be redeemed by God; and the first inkling that the man Jesus is none other than God himself.

I think this episode has something encouraging to tell us about the value of our own doubts. We sometimes think of doubt as the enemy of faith. But there’s a great biblical tradition of people grappling with uncertainty, and robustly questioning God, from Abraham bargaining over the fate of condemned cities, through Jacob literally wrestling with God for a blessing, to Job’s searching questions about the nature of suffering. It’s a tradition which permeates Jewish teaching to this day; the late chief rabbi Jonathan Sacks described Judaism as “a religion of questions”. While Christianity might reply that the answers are found in Jesus Christ, that doesn’t mean that asking questions is a bad thing: far from it. In the gospels, time and again Jesus uses questions to help people understand underlying truths about him, or themselves. Our questions, honestly asked, can provide a route to clarification, better understanding and deeper faith. The God of the bible is not offended by questions, and questions are not a sign of weakness. To quote Lord Sacks again, “to ask is to believe that somewhere there is an answer”.

Thomas did eventually get a chance to put his doubts to Jesus in person. What about us, a couple of thousand years too late; where should we go for answers? We could start with the evidence of the bible, material accumulated over centuries to shed light on the truth of the relationship God seeks with his world. Today’s gospel was written for that express purpose: “so that you might come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you might have life in his name”.

But we should also remember that Jesus didn’t entrust his message solely to the eloquence of his disciples. At that first encounter in the upper room he endowed them with the Holy Spirit: God’s eternal presence with his people, the comforter and advocate whose role is to lead us into all truth. It’s no accident that this gift is linked with the authority to forgive sins, which in Jewish teaching was the preserve of God alone. By breathing his spirit into them, Jesus is sharing with them a part of himself, confirmed at Pentecost as a gift to the entire church: the voice of God within us.

Sometimes, it’s true, that voice is hard to discern among the many competing calls for our attention. Sometimes we are confused: is this what God is saying to me or is it just what I want to hear? That’s not always an easy call to make, but here, briefly, are three pointers to truth. Truth heals. Truth brings peace. And truth sets us free. If we arrive at an understanding that brings us healing, peace and freedom, we are beginning to experience the life that Jesus came to give. And while doubts and uncertainty will surely continue to trouble us, we can have confidence in the God who turns defeat on its head and for whom there is no such thing as a lost cause.