

Sermon: Rev Susanna Pain
30 March 2008

John 20:19-30 Easter 2
THOMAS



We're all here, directly, or indirectly, because of a story. Maybe you're here because someone asked you, you know someone, maybe because of your engagement with the Christian story. Perhaps you are curious, or committed or questioning. Let me tell you a story of symbol and trust ... of grief and hope ...

Butterflies have been an important symbol for me for a long time.

After a retreat in Lyneham many years ago I bought myself a butterfly ring and necklace from Beaver Gallery as a symbol of new life, of finally leaving home. I also bought my parents a beautiful pottery bowl – to say thanks for their care.

A short time later I chose the butterfly, a symbol of resurrection, for my white ordination stole. It is a Ulysses butterfly – the wanderer, or pilgrim – a symbol with layers of meaning.

The life cycle of the butterfly is a metaphor for the story of Easter. The caterpillar seems to die, dissolve, then eventually re-emerge from the chrysalis, with wrinkled wet wings which dry in the sun and a beautiful butterfly is born – a miracle of new life, colour, beauty, which touches the earth lightly.

At midnight on Christmas Eve in the year 2000, I was preaching in the dark quiet to a packed congregation at St James Church, King Street in the centre of Sydney.

I was in the middle of my sermon when a huge butterfly flew above our heads. I was mesmerized, and so was the congregation. I stopped my sermon and watched then said, 'I thought butterflies were an Easter symbol, not Christmas!' then went on with my sermon.

The next Sunday I spoke of butterflies. Little did I know that my future husband, Nikolai, who was sitting near the front of the church with his daughter Kate, had different thoughts.

Exactly 12 months earlier, he had buried his beloved wife, Ellie. Shortly before her death he had bought her a beautiful white nightgown, not realizing till after her death that it was decorated with the outline of butterflies.

On the day of Ellie's death, at Calvary Hospice in Sydney, Nikolai went outside onto the balcony trying to make sense of it all. A butterfly flew around Nikolai seeming to dance, then landed right next to his hand, on the balustrade, its wings pulsing. Then it did a figure of 8 dance as it left, and a boat that had been in the harbour all week slowly moved out to sea. Nikolai understood; Ellie was okay, she was saying goodbye.

Twelve months later when he saw the butterfly at St James, again he was reassured, and felt he was home and need look no further – he had found a new partner and Ellie would give her blessing ...

So, on 6 January, two weeks later, the Feast of the Epiphany, Nikolai called me and asked me out ...

and the poignant resurrection, new life symbol continues ... My life and Nikolai's began again.

The Easter disciples too were grieving, fearful, uncomprehending – but something from their experience of Jesus' life leads them to trust – something in Jesus' words changes them ...

Thomas turns around – from vehement denial, questions and skepticism – to faith, trust and an astonishing statement which is the climax of John's gospel:

'My lord and my God!'

What happened?

What does it take to turn around, to trust, to believe? How do we make the shift? How do we know the God of Jesus?

The Anglican Church would say, rather dryly, that we know God through Scripture, tradition and reason held in balance. I want to explain this a little bit.

For us, Scripture is our primary source of knowledge about God. We can engage it with our minds, our hearts, our imagination (even through dance) and God can speak to us through the poetry, stories, writings and songs of Scripture.

We can come to Scripture with questions, and reading can raise more. Only sometimes are there answers, or moments of insight, comfort and stillness. Scholarship continues to bring new interpretations to light.

Through the Scriptures we can learn a lot, and encounter the many faces of God. (I imagine Thomas ...)

Scripture is primary, then there is the collective wisdom of those gone before us down the centuries, asking their own questions, like Thomas, and trying to make sense of God and experience. This we call tradition.

In 2000 I made a pilgrimage with 34 others to Israel, Palestine and Turkey... a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. In Jerusalem, we walked the way of the cross with thousands of others, down narrow alleys and up steep ramps, pausing at each station for a reading and prayers. We were jostled, and photographed, people along the way offered goods for sale.

We walked the path millions of others through the ages have walked before. Some in our group were disappointed when they lagged behind in the crowd. Others were fascinated as sacred and secular rubbed shoulders. It was ever thus.

I was inspired by the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, cared for by – different – Christian churches, all expressing their faith in different ways – some gaudy and not particularly to my taste – but all visible expressions of Christianity ... (and the presence of other pilgrims from the US, Germany, Brazil, Seychelles, Italy, Malta) all testified to something ...

[At Ephesus we stood in the theatre where Paul caused a riot ... and heard a reading from Acts (Acts 19:23) telling the story.]

On our last Sunday we celebrated mass in a cave church in Cappadocia carved out of the rock in the 7th Century and decorated with the local ochre. I felt connected with the communion of saints down the ages ...

and somehow I learned of God.

I have a great sense of history, of connection with the communion of saints, those who have gone before and paved the way, and who are still a part of what we are today.

(We all have family stories, well worn myths, family tradition, and many of us are formed by Christian traditions, the Book of Common Prayer, hymns, psalms, creeds. I often wake up with words of a hymn in my mind and these words, often unexpectedly speak to my experiences.)

Our traditions shape us and they are an inescapable part of who we are today. They too teach us of God.

Some want to discard the past. But it is only when we are earthed, grounded solidly in our tradition / history that we can have the freedom to move on, to question and walk new paths.

And so we come to the third part of the triangle – of Scripture, tradition and reason. To reason (or experience) that is tradition brought up to date.

It is okay to have questions and its okay not to have all the answers.

Notice that Thomas was not with his friends when Jesus appeared to them the first time after his death, yet, a week later, Thomas was with them (v.26). The church, the disciples, didn't throw Thomas out because of his questions, his doubts.

It seems important to provide enough space for the doubter. There are times when we as a community hold others, and times when we need to allow others to hold us.

So if we learn of God also from present experience (as well as from Scripture and tradition) then it is important to listen, watch, notice, to hear the stories of those we meet, to search for hints of God in the cracks (and to stay with people on their journey no matter where it takes them). We need to find out what questions people are asking, to get our hands dirty, to stay with each other, hang in there – because that is where we'll find God today.

Rex Hunt comments: 'there is no such word as doubt in the Greek!' Strange ... as if asking questions is the same as 'raising a white flag of surrender' and evidence of faithlessness!

It was the German/American theologian Paul Tillich, in his small, blue bound book, called ***Dynamics of faith***, who claimed authentic faith included doubt as well as affirmation – and that questions were not a sign of faithlessness, but a willingness to take faith seriously.

And others have followed Tillich's lead, such as Val Webb in her excellent book of some years back: ***In defence of doubt. An invitation to adventure.***

And so we come back to Thomas with his questions and doubts. Thomas met the risen wounded Christ – he recognized Christ in the wounds, and through him, the surprising, untamable God of adventure, who touches us where we are, in the middle of our struggles and at the limits of reason. I believe and trust that this same God keeps reaching out to us.

On the day before I was ordained deacon on 23 December 1989, almost 20 years ago now, I wrote this prayer:

Lord, I came to you, a free person. I freely choose to give my life to you. I know you have called me to this office⁴ but I have been free to accept or reject the offer. Now I freely choose it and am grateful for the privilege.

There have been times when I have been angry and fought against you, in fear.

Now, in awe and fear for your majesty, I come to you in love: to give, to have and to hold

for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, till in death we are fully united.

Lord, I kneel before you, as a bride before the altar, after many years of preparation, of your patient waiting, I come,

slowly, lightly, smiling. I walk forward, aware of the moment of this occasion, but already the butterflies are flying free and catching the sun on their wings as they dip and touch the pollen from the flowers and sip their sweet nectar.

I step lightly, aware of the possible suffering to come. Suffering that love brings, but this is not the moment to dwell on that, for 'faith, hope, and love abide and the greatest of these is love' – the strength of your love, and my human love will overcome and I will live.

So I come, ready now for this moment ... The bishop lays his hands on me, but I have eyes only for you, Lord Christ Jesus, my saviour and friend.

Yes, it may all sound sentimental, and even simplistic, but it is the end and the beginning of a long hard struggle, for now I am free, and I choose life, clerical collar and all!

For those still following
Christ is risen!
For those, like Peter, still denying
Christ is risen!
For those, like Caiaphas, still controlling
Christ is risen!
For those, like Mary, still searching
Christ is risen!
For those, like Pilate, still washing their hands
Christ is risen!
For those, like Thomas, still doubting
Christ is risen!
For those, like Judas, still betraying
Christ is risen!
For those, like Mary, still anointing
Christ is risen!
Go in peace to tell the world
Christ is risen!
Alleluia, alleluia!
In the name of Christ. Amen.