

# Kington Baptist Church

## MESSAGE BOARD – Easter Day

### Thomas the disciple on Easter day

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Thomas, we are told, was not among the other disciples when the Risen Christ first appeared to them after his resurrection. When Thomas arrived, after Jesus had left, his first response to the news that Jesus was risen – ‘*We have seen the Lord!*’ – was abruptly to reject that testimony and disbelieve the good news the Apostles presented to him. The depth of Thomas’s failing is seen in the fact the Risen Lord had just commissioned the disciples as Apostles, to be his witnesses: *As the Father has sent me, so I send you.* Of course Thomas’s response echoed the same disbelief that all the disciples demonstrated when they first heard the same news from Mary Magdalene, the other ‘apostle’ the Risen Lord had commissioned – ‘the apostle of the Apostles’ (St Thomas Aquinas). *It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them, who told these things to the apostles. And their words seemed to them like idle tales, and they did not believe them.* (Luke 24.10-11)

The failure of Thomas to believe the Apostles’ testimony is the reason behind every rejection of this message, whatever ‘reason’ or excuse a person may use to defend their rejection of the fact of the resurrection and of the Risen Christ. The Apostles were the Lord’s commissioned witnesses – their witness is trustworthy and is to be believed on the basis of the Lord’s commission. To reject his witness is a failure prompted by the same temptation that the ‘serpent’ whispered into the ear of Eve: *Did God really say?...* (Genesis 3.1)

We ought also to note in the disbelief of Thomas is an insistence on the validity of his own private judgement of certainties: *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.* (John 20.25) Thomas places an infallible trust in his own ability to determine truth and falsehood. He intends to subject Jesus to his private interrogation and then, depending on what he finds, he will make up his mind on the trustworthiness and validity of the words of the Apostles. This is the very heart of unbelief! This is the ‘prize’ the ‘serpent’ offered Eve. She is told that she need not believe what God had said, let alone obey what God commands. She ought, Satan insists, make up her own mind: *your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.* (Genesis 3.5) ‘You be your own God’, he tempts, ‘make up your own mind.’ This is precisely how the world reacts to the Word of God; they ignore the fact that they are, we all are, inadequate to the task: *Father, Lord of heaven and earth, you have hidden these things from the wise and clever and have revealed them to babes; yes, Father, for this pleased you.* (Luke 10.21) John Henry Newman put it like this: *The people of this day, though they read the Scriptures and think they understand them, like our*

*Lord's contemporaries, who read the Scriptures and thought they understood them, do not understand them. Why? Because like the Lord's contemporaries, they have been taught badly; they have received false traditions.*

Lastly, we seem to be mistaken about Thomas. He's come down to us with the nickname 'Doubting Thomas'. This is a mistake, for two reasons. Firstly, it's alien to the mind of Jesus that any of his redeemed people should be labelled with their past failures and sins. His will is for us to be known as his *friends* and known by our present *hope*, not by our past failures: 'every sinner has a past, every believer has a future'. We know Peter as 'The Rock' (not as 'Peter the Denier'); we know David as 'King David' (not as 'David the Adulterer/Murderer'); we know Paul as 'Paul the Apostle' (not as 'Paul the Persecutor') and so on...

But our mistake, in referring to Thomas as 'The Doubter', is perhaps more serious, it ignores the meekness and kind compassion of Jesus towards those who fail him. There is an unequalled loving gentleness in our Lord's response to those who did such terrible wrong to him throughout the time of his Passion. Think of Peter and his appalling denials. Our Lord's response was his sublime look, when Peter, distraught and weeping inconsolably, caught the eye of Jesus, as Jesus *'turned and looked on Peter'*. And, after his resurrection, when our Lord meets Peter on the shore of Galilee, he doesn't so much as mention Peter's failure. And think of the altogether unexpected mitigation of Pontius Pilate's part in the death of Jesus: *You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.* (John 19.11) Think of our Lord's plea from the Cross, in which his deep compassion pleads for the mitigation of the sins of his executioners: *Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.* (Luke 23.34)

Thomas also found our Lord's mercy and patience. If we didn't know the outcome, we'd surely expect the Lord to upbraid Thomas in no uncertain terms! But he didn't. He condescended to Thomas's pride and foolishness: *Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.*

Now we see the depth of the plot unfold. It was no mere quirk of chance that Thomas was absent when our Lord appeared to his disciples. It was within the purpose of God – for your benefit and mine. Thomas gets his way. And, after all his wayward self-reliance, comes, at last, to make the most complete statement of our Lord's dignity found in all of the four Gospels: *My Lord and my God.* Never overlook the gentle love and patient mercy of Christ, who goes to any length to reclaim his wandering sheep. But the Lord doesn't offer us what he offered Thomas – sight and touch. Is that because he doesn't really care if people believe or not? Of course that isn't the case. But reminds us we are given a firmer proof: his **Word!** *Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.* (Romans 10.17)

*Jesus said to Thomas, Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.* (John 20.29)