

“Christ is Alive: the faith of Thomas”

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 27 April 2025

A Reflection by Warren Talbot

Easter 2C

**Contemporary Reading: *Roll Back the Stone* a poem by Janet Morley;
John 20: 24-29**

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

It's been a momentous week, the first week of Eastertide 2025. I'm not referring to the Federal election, though I'm not cynically dismissing some of the important policy issues which are at stake on the 3rd of May. If you're not one of the 2.4 million Australians who have already voted, the Uniting Church has published a very good guide to some of the policy issues, from a Christian perspective. It's on the Assembly website. <https://uniting.church/a-vision-for-a-just-australia>

The momentous week I'm thinking of is the death of Pope Francis, with the funeral being held yesterday. Many words have already been written about Francis' contribution to a more welcoming and pastoral Catholic Church, and his prophetic call to care for Earth, our common home. We have used some of Francis's words from his 2015 encyclical *Laudate Si* in our liturgies here at Pitt Street.

It was encouraging yesterday to hear the Dean of the College of Cardinals make direct reference to Francis' special commitment to refugees, displaced persons and immigrants. One can only hope that the world leaders present were listening.

This morning I'm wanting to focus our reflections on the Gospel reading and so-called doubting Thomas.

Apart from the canonical gospels, I note in passing that there are non-canonical works associated with Thomas.

The Gospel of Thomas is referred to considerably by New Testament scholars, with some dating it from the first century CE. *The Acts of Thomas* is at least 200 years later, and the main source for the conviction of some of our partner churches in India, that Thomas travelled to India and founded a number of Christ communities there.

Thomas is listed in the three synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke as a disciple, but doesn't rate another single mention. Additional words about Thomas only appears in the Gospel according to John with the unknown author writing in the late part of the first century CE, or perhaps early in the second century – that is, a good seventy years after the death of Jesus.

In John chapter 11, Thomas displays courage. In the narrative, the Temple authorities are threatening to stone Jesus. Thomas urges the other followers to go with Jesus *“that we may die with him”*. No too much doubt there.

In chapter 14, when John’s Jesus talks of going away, a literary euphemism for the Cross, Thomas speaks up and asks Jesus *“where are you going?”*. Thomas deeply wants to follow Jesus.

In our reading today from chapter 20, Thomas was not present when the risen One appears to the other disciples, and so is seeking to actually see the risen Jesus. In the narrative, the risen Jesus appears to Thomas eight days later, with Jesus declaring:

“You believe because you have seen.

Happy are those who have not seen and yet believe.”

The “happy ones” must surely include us and millions of others. But what are we believing?

The convictions we form about this and other biblical texts lies in our views concerning whether we are dealing with historical material, and/or aspects of memory, and/or amount of interpretation. History, and/or memory, and/or interpretation. In different words, is the text to be read literallyor metaphorically?Or both?

As many of you would be aware, progressive Christians tend to receive these texts as metaphor, rather than as literal historical or biographical accounts. We place a strong emphasis on the interpretation of the writer, and the underlying meanings of the text.

My perspective is that all of Jesus’ followers, not only Thomas, would have been living in doubt and fear after the Crucifixion. Perhaps they would be next? The writer portrays them as huddling in a locked room in Jerusalem when the risen Jesus suddenly appears. The risen One’s body is not restrained by materiality, and that to me suggests a spiritual presence.

All the disciples doubted, and feared that the love and grace of God they had encountered in the life and teaching of Jesus had died, and was no more. No more freedom for the captives, sight for the blind, or good news to the poor.

The Gospel accounts have compressed into a few days what was more likely, in reality, to have been a gradual and growing awareness: that the love and grace they had known in Jesus remained with them. There was an ongoing experience of the presence of Jesus such that they could proclaim that *“Christ is alive”*. In the face of injustice and oppression, death does not have the final word. The hope and love experienced in the person of Jesus cannot be destroyed.

Although the language used was a bit different, this eternal hope and love was evident in Francis’ funeral yesterday.

This underlying truth of the Easter message is captured in the poetry of Janet Morley we heard earlier. I conclude with it:

*When we are all despairing,
when the world is full of grief
when we see no way ahead
and hope has gone away:
Roll back the stone.*

*Although we fear change,
although we are not ready,
although we'd rather weep
and run away:
Roll back the stone.*

*Because we're coming with the women,
because we hope where hope is vain,
because you call us from the grave
and show the way:
Roll back the stone.*

The Christ is alive!

Thanks be to God!

References

For an academically acclaimed account by an Australian Anglican theologian and former Archbishop see: Peter Carnley, *The Reconstruction of Resurrection Belief*, (Cascade, 2019).

For a popular account of recent progressive Christian thinking see: Marcis Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*, (Harper One, 2006).

For a listing of online resources for liturgy available from Janet Morley see:
<https://www.theworshipcloud.com/tags/janet%20morley>

Janet Morley's most well-known and loved collection of prayers is: Janet Morley, *All Desires Known*, Expanded Edition, (SPCK, 1992)