

Elephant fly - Easter 2. 7/4/24

I saw a peanut stand, heard a rubber band

And seen a needle wink its eye

But I be done seen about everything

When I see an elephant fly

When I see an elephant fly

I've seen a front porch swing, heard a diamond
ring

I've seen a polka dot railroad tie

But I be done seen about everything

When I see an elephant fly.

I imagine that most of you will have seen things in your lives that you have found hard to believe - I know I have. Just for a few examples, I have seen and heard musicians play

their instruments in ways I didn't think possible, ranging from impossibly fast guitar and piano work to circular breathing on the flute, voice, and didgeridoo, to violin pieces that threaten to have the instrument burst into flames. I have seen acrobats whose contortions and antics makes your entire body cringe just to look at them, and I have seen videos of extreme sportsmen and women who defy the forces of nature to accomplish insane things. I have also seen people recover from illnesses which would seem impossible - cancers just disappear, and babies with congenital heart complications that suddenly seem to decide to right themselves, and the baby goes from blue and dying to pink and

strong in ten minutes - and you didn't do anything.

These are barely a fraction of events I have experienced that have left me wondering, 'How the dickens did that happen?'

But at heart and by nature I am a doubter and a cynic. Probably because I am an academic, and I need evidence, you'll excuse me if I line up behind Thomas this morning, and say, 'I'm with him - this sounds to me like a load of old wobble.'

Even after a lifetime of seeing things I found hard to believe, and even forcing myself to do things I never thought I could - I still remain the difficult, intransigent curmudgeon who won't be swayed.

People like that are hard to deal with, and not often team players. Recognising this as an intermittent trait in myself, I wondered how I got to be such a way.

I thought back to my childhood, and began to realize that I had been the victim of many practical jokes - probably because of the unfortunate date of my birthday - April 1st - which gave all and sundry carte blanche to play whatever tricks on me they wanted. And, as a youngster, I was probably very gullible.

Given my recent - and still smarting - experience with being conned by an internet scam of several thousand dollars, I suppose I'm still not too smart. 'Stupid is as stupid

does,' as Forrest Gump's mother used to tell him.

But let's get away from me and my stupidity and look a bit more deeply at Thomas in our gospel.

His full name was Thomas Judah/s Didymus, and he was thought to be one of the brothers of Jesus, and called the 'Twin', because of his resemblance to Jesus himself. He is mentioned at the beginning of Mark 6, along with James and Joses, as being the brothers of Jesus.

As a brother of Jesus, it is more understandable that he might be sceptical of

his brother's abilities, and when we first see him mentioned in John's gospel, it is with a note of critical sarcasm from John's reporting. In John 11 we hear that Lazarus is sick and not doing well. Shortly after, we hear that he has died.

The disciples are against going back to Judea, because an attempt had been made to stone Jesus on their last visit, but Jesus insists and says that he's going to wake Lazarus up.

Thomas, ever the cynic, says that they might as well go along then and die with him - because he doesn't believe that Jesus can raise a dead man.

We all know the ending to that story. The point being made here is that we get to

understand that Thomas is not a man to be easily convinced of anything. He is innately trusting, but that has got him into trouble in the past, and now he no longer takes things at face value. He needs to be convinced by solid proof. It is not enough to just be told something is so, he has to see for himself.

As an aside, some of the artistic representations of the scene with Jesus showing Thomas his wounds are supremely ridiculous, with the disciples portrayed as octogenarians, at the very least. This is absurd - the disciples would all have been around the same age as Jesus, probably

between 30 and 40; maybe some younger - but certainly not old men.

But to return to our story, which I have no reason to doubt - play on words intended.

I think the main issue with Thomas may have been what it is with us - as I suggested last weekend. Once we have got to the realization that Jesus did, indeed, rise from the grave in a physical body, then the comprehension of its meaning becomes paramount.

It ceases to be a conflict between belief and unbelief, but between belief and understanding.

Do we not have such issues on a daily basis? You know that your 'fridge works, but probably

not how; you know that your iPhone works, but almost certainly not how; and for me at least, I know that my car works, but I don't know how. I venture to suggest that many of you take the workings of your body for granted - you believe that your digestion will work, your eyes will see, your ears will hear, your nose will continue to pick up odours - and so on; but probably most of you don't know how.

So we all have daily examples of the gap between what we believe and what we understand. Even if we were to take the image of the rubber band from the words of the song I attempted at the start of this sermon; we believe it will stretch, but how it actually elongates and then returns to its original size

in terms of molecular biology remains a mystery to most of us.

Having been with Jesus from the beginning of his ministry, Thomas would, by now, have been accustomed to the fact that Jesus was capable of miraculous deeds, including raising the dead - as he had seen with Lazarus, despite his sarcastic comment as recorded by John.

However, for Jesus to be raised himself is to go several quantum leaps beyond what anyone could possibly grasp. At this stage it is all he can do to simply appreciate the truth of Jesus' resurrection - as a fact, which he had doubted.

What that fact represented took the disciples time to understand collectively, and even then, only some of them really fully understood the propitiation and substitution concept.

Some of you will be aware that there exists a Gospel of Thomas - or more correctly, the Coptic Gospel of Thomas. We should be clear here; this is not the same man who was the apostle Thomas, the companion and possible brother of Jesus.

The work is proto-gnostic, and contains only sayings attributed to Jesus, and is not a narrative of his life. It does not mention his crucifixion, his resurrection, or the final judgement; nor does it mention a messianic

understanding of Jesus. Let us therefore leave that on one side as irrelevant to our theme, which is the gap between belief and understanding.

Unfortunately, many people fail to see the importance of requiring both for their faith.

We believe that the sun will rise every day and set; we believe that the tides will come and go on the seashore, and some of us will have a vague idea that the tides are somehow connected to the phases of the moon.

But not understanding why these things occur really has no impact on our lives. After all, these phenomena will continue despite our ignorance.

Sadly for us, that you believe in the fact of the resurrection does not come into the same category. It matters very much that you understand the purpose and meaning of the resurrection, otherwise your faith is based on an event alone, and not the meaning behind it.

If I, as a surgeon, were to tell you that you have a cancer - you would understand that as a fact. You might also grasp the implication that it's not a *Good Thing*, and might kill you.

So far, so good. You believe what I have told you.

If I then tell you that I can remove that cancer and give you back your normal expected lifespan, because I am a cancer surgeon and I

can do that - and you walk away muttering that you have cancer, you have really missed the point.

Hence we have those who, given the diagnosis, will say, 'Sod it - let's have a good time. I'm going to die anyway, so let's make the most of it.'

Others will be steeped in gloom and say, 'I'm going to die, I'm going to die, I'm going to die - it's going to be horrible and painful, I think I'll just go and blow my brains out.'

Neither has listened to the surgeon; he has given you a diagnosis that is going to kill you -

but he has also given you a way out of that predicament, if you care to take it.

Thomas believed - finally - that he had seen the risen Christ; but it's entirely possible he missed the implication of what that meant - not only for him - but for all of us.

So listen to what Jesus had been saying all along in his ministry, when he says, 'Seek first the kingdom of heaven'.

He is saying, 'You know you have a cancer; I am telling you that **I am** the one who can remove it for you. What are you waiting for?'

An elephant to fly, perhaps?