

“Learning Discipleship from the Disciples”

Thomas: Doubt and Devotion

John 11:1-16; 14:5-7; 20:24-29

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We often call this disciple “Doubting Thomas.” And we use that phrase to describe anyone who refuses to believe without seeing the evidence for themselves. And Thomas did doubt what the other disciples told him about Jesus being alive. Thomas would likely fit in well in our day. He wanted proof, he wanted to see for himself, he wanted to investigate. His questioning, doubting, and desire for evidence, reflect the way a lot of people think. Thomas dared to doubt. He had a faith that could stand to ask questions and that could endure doubts.

But doubting was not all there was to Thomas. He was daring in his devotion to Christ as well. His devotion is seen in his willingness to lay down his life with Jesus, in his seeking to know more of what Jesus talked about, and in his expression of faith when the risen Lord revealed himself to him.

Let’s look at each scene that features Thomas (as so often, they’re all in John’s Gospel). We’ll see Thomas’ commitment and his questions. We’ll also see what Jesus says in response.

After a dispute with religious leaders in Jerusalem, Jesus escapes from a crowd that is ready to stone him. He and his disciples go back across the Jordan River to the place where John the Baptist had baptized in the early days (John 10:31-42). While there, word comes that Lazarus is sick. Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha, live in Bethany, just outside Jerusalem. They are close friends of Jesus and the disciples. When Jesus hears that Lazarus is sick, he declares that the sickness will be the occasion for God’s glory to be revealed. And he stays where he is for two more days. Then he says to the disciples, “Let’s go back to Judea.”

Now they like Lazarus as much as anybody, but they can’t believe Jesus really wants to go there. They say to Jesus, “But Rabbi, a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?” You’re going to risk your life—and maybe ours—to go visit a sick friend?

Jesus, led by the Father, does plan to go to Judea. He's a model for the disciples of walking in the light. Then Jesus tells them that Lazarus has fallen asleep. They take this literally and think Lazarus must be on the road to recovery. But Jesus was talking about death. Lazarus has died, but Jesus plans to wake him up. As a result, the disciples will believe. Then he says, "Let us go to him."

And Thomas says to the others, "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (Jn 11:1-16). Some see Thomas as pessimistic here: "Everything's lost. Let's join dead Lazarus" (Ellsworth Kalas, *The Thirteen Apostles* 97). But probably he's saying, "Jesus is going to risk his life. Let's go with him. We'll lay down our lives as well." Thomas proposes that they follow Jesus even to death. And that is part of the call for faithful disciples. But Thomas' suggestion is like Peter's rash claim that he would die for Jesus (13:31-32). Thomas and the others were not yet ready to follow Jesus to the death. Sadly, Thomas and the others will fail to follow Jesus when he's arrested, tried, tortured and crucified. But their desire to follow all the way was authentic. They were moving in the right direction (J. Ramsey Michaels, *John Good News Commentary*).

Do we dare commit ourselves to Jesus whatever the cost? Do we dare lay down our lives in surrender to him? Thomas *expressed* that kind of devotion. Are we willing to *live* it?

Later, in the upper room, after Jesus has washed the disciples' feet and after Judas has gone into the night, Jesus tells the disciples that he is going away. Peter asks, "Where are you going? Why can't I go?" Jesus responds with beautiful words of comfort that we often use at funerals. Words about the Father's house and many dwelling places and trusting God, trusting Jesus.

Then Jesus says, "You know the way to the place where I am going." And Thomas says, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Thomas wasn't afraid to admit that he didn't understand. He wasn't afraid to ask questions. The others may have been wondering the same thing and were perhaps grateful that he did ask.

And Thomas' question opens the door for Jesus to make one of his most powerful statements. He says, "I am the way and the truth and the life.

No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him" (14:4-7). Jesus is the truth, Jesus is the life, that gives us the way to live. Jesus is the true way to life and he is the way to true life.

Jesus is the way to God. An essential part of our faith is that Jesus is unique. God has done in Jesus what God has done nowhere else. Jesus shows us God in a way no one else does. This raises some questions in relation to people of other faiths and we need to deal with the danger of bigotry and arrogance. But there's nothing arrogant about Jesus. This one who is the way is the one who brings grace and truth, who loves and heals, who serves as a slave, who lays down his life.

We can spend a lot of time talking about the relationships between different religions. But we can't give up the uniqueness of Jesus. For me, the bottom line is that somehow, everyone who comes to God comes through Jesus.

There's an old story about a pilot who crash landed in the jungles of Burma (that's how old the story is; it's not Burma now, it's Myanmar). The pilot was not seriously injured, and when a native came to help him get through the jungle, he was able to follow. But it was difficult trudging. The new friend had to hack and chop the denseness of the jungle with his knife so they could walk. Not feeling altogether safe, the pilot asked, "Are you sure this is the way?" His rescuer replied, "There is no way. I am the way. Follow me!" (Wallace Chappell, *When Jesus Rose* 97).

St. Augustine said, "I do not say to you, Seek a way; the Way himself has come to you. Arise and walk!" (quoted in Reuben Welch, *We Really Do Need to Listen* 41).

The third scene that features Thomas is after Jesus' resurrection. On the evening of resurrection day, Jesus appeared to the disciples. He blessed them with peace, sent them out as the Father had sent him, he breathed the Holy Spirit on them and commissioned them to bring forgiveness to people. *Thomas, one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came.* Where was he? Why wasn't he with them? I wish I knew. But because Thomas wasn't with the others that evening, Jesus had the opportunity to

appear to them again and address Thomas' doubts. As a result, Thomas made a dramatic confession of faith in Jesus.

After Thomas missed the Lord's appearance to the disciples, they told him, "We have seen the Lord!" And he said, "Maybe you saw something—a hallucination or a ghost or something. But I don't think you really saw Jesus. And unless I see for myself and put my hands on the evidence, I will not believe."

The crucifixion of Jesus was devastating for all the disciples. Maybe Thomas was trying to deal with it by getting alone and thinking things through. Maybe he was deciding to get on with his life the best way he knew how and try to deal with the fact that Jesus was dead. And now, the others have this story about seeing Jesus alive, really alive. The Jewish resurrection hope was for a general resurrection at the end of history. They didn't think about an individual being raised from the dead into a new kind of life during this present age. Thomas was probably going through all that he had learned, maybe even reviewing what Jesus had said. Jesus had talked about being raised from the dead, but it had seemed like he was talking in parables or riddles. Could he have really meant it literally?

Thomas needed to see for himself. He wouldn't believe on the basis of hearsay. We do need to know the risen Lord for ourselves. But Thomas refused to believe eyewitness testimony as well. This is why we call him "Doubting Thomas."

But skeptical as he was, I doubt that Thomas got very far away from the other disciples during that next week. We really do need each other in the body of Christ. The flames of faith burn brighter when we are together than when we are apart. And, finally, at the end of that week, the disciples were in the house again. Thomas was there this time. And, though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then, in grace and love, the risen Lord Jesus spoke to Thomas. He directed his attention to Thomas. Jesus told Thomas, "Here's the evidence you're looking for. Look. Touch the scars. Stop doubting and believe." The time for doubts was past. The time for faith was here.

I don't know if Thomas accepted the invitation and actually touched Jesus' wounds. But his demand for evidence seems to have become

unimportant now. He says to Jesus, "My Lord and my God!" Doubt gave way to the greatest devotion. This is the height of confessing Jesus. This is what the Gospel has been aiming for all along.

Do you worry about your doubts? Do you ever struggle with doubt? I think we all do at some time. A prayer's not answered the way we think it should be. We have trouble understanding why some things happen the way they do. A skeptic or unbeliever raises an objection that we can't respond to easily. Some Christians, faced with the doubts and challenges of the modern (or post-modern) world, give up too much too easily. Studying certain subjects can raise disturbing questions. But God can handle all that.

If you're in a canoe, you can lean over just a little way and tip it easily. But if you're on an ocean liner, you can lean way out and it doesn't shake the ship a bit. The Christian faith is strong enough and sturdy enough not to be shaken by our doubts. Our personal faith can be strong enough to stand doubts.

I like what Frederick Buechner says along this line: "Without somehow destroying me in the process, how could God reveal himself in a way that would leave no room for doubt? If there were no room for doubt, there would be no room for me" (<http://aboutfrederickbuechner.net/content/if-there-were-no-room-doubt>; I can't remember the original source).

Thomas wanted proof, evidence, and he believed when he saw it. But he had more than just evidence. He had an encounter with the living Lord. He had faith. There's a place for reason and intellect in Christian faith and life. There's a place for study and thinking through our beliefs. But there is also a lot more to faith and life in Christ. I read a story this week about a young woman whose father is a Christian apologist. That is, he specializes in defending the faith—not apologizing for it, but giving a reasoned defense of it. From the time she was very young, he would teach her and quiz her on details of Christian theology. Then, often he would take her to churches where he was speaking and have her stand up and recite answers to theological questions. Then he would berate the congregation for not knowing as much about theology as his little daughter. She describes life with her father as almost constant intellectual training in Christian thinking. She showed off what she knew in her college classes. But then one day, a

question came to her that she couldn't answer. Not being able to reconcile what she was thinking with what she had been taught, she decided that the Bible and Christian faith were lies. She says she is no longer a Christian and that freedom is now her god

[\(http://www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2013/07/15/the-atheist-daughter-of-a-notable-christian-apologist-shares-her-story/\)](http://www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2013/07/15/the-atheist-daughter-of-a-notable-christian-apologist-shares-her-story/).

There's more to the article and I'm sure there's more to her family's story. What a sad story. It's possible to have a view of evidence for faith that is not adequate. We can get so locked into a certain view of Christian faith and life that we think it's the only way to see it, so it's either all that way or nothing. But then a challenge to our view can pull it apart. We need more than a lot of evidence and argument. We need to trust God's grace. We need to be open to the coming of the living Lord to us personally. Jesus came to Thomas and spoke to him. He comes to you and to me with his love, his word, his life, his power.

When Thomas saw Jesus alive, he was convinced and he called Jesus, "My Lord and my God." Jesus gently rebuked Thomas. "Do you believe because you have seen me?" Then Jesus included us when he said, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." Jesus can be as real to our faith as he was to the disciples who saw him and spoke with him. He is alive and he is here. Will we trust him and believe in him and claim him as our Lord and God?

Thomas was another who was present when Jesus appeared to a group of disciples on the lakeshore. And that's all we know of him from the New Testament. According to Church tradition, Thomas preached through much of Asia. It's fairly certain that he went to India. Christians in India trace the existence of their church to the apostle Thomas. He is the only disciple to have a denomination named after him: India's Mar Thoma Church. It may be significant that this church, named for Thomas, has proved outstanding for its faithfulness and courage. Tradition says that on a mountain now called Mount Thomas, this apostle died as a martyr by being pierced with a lance (Kalas, 101-02).

That's why Wyatt portrays Thomas holding a lance. The model for Thomas was a truck driver named Larry Smith that Wyatt met in a

restaurant in his hometown. He says he want to show Thomas filled with conviction and courage and Christ, no longer “Doubting Thomas.” Jesus said to Thomas, “You have believed.” And from then on, Thomas was a believer, a changed man, a courageous preacher and missionary. It’s said that he spent the next thirty years preaching, working and building churches (*The Apostles* 34).

I like how Ellsworth Kalas concludes his chapter on Thomas:

Thomas lived, struggled, and preached in the first century, but I’m satisfied that he would be at home in the twenty-first. In our day, Jesus would probably find Thomas in the physics or chemistry department of a university, or perhaps in some independent think tank. He was a man who looked for facts, always insisting on substantial evidence.

So it’s impressive that he left us with what may well be the most vigorous and committed confession of faith to be found anywhere in the New Testament: *My Lord and my God!*

Perhaps our twenty-first century world—this generation so possessed of the spirit of Thomas—will yet come to be the greatest generation of faith. Please, God, may it be so! (102)

Will you join Thomas in working through your doubts, being devoted to Jesus and claiming him as Lord and God?