

Thomas, the Hesitant Believer

Devotional Reading: Psalm 91:1–6

Background Scripture: John 11:14–16; 14:5–8; 20:24–29; 21:1–2

Today's Scripture: John 11:14–16; 14:5–8; 20:24–29; 21:1–2

I. Physical Death

John 11:14–16

14 Then said Jesus unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead.

15 And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, to the intent ye may believe; nevertheless let us go unto him.

16 Then said Thomas, which is called Didymus, unto his fellowdisciples, Let us also go, that we may die with him.

14. While teaching in or near Bethany beyond the Jordan and establishing many believers, Jesus receives word that a friend named Lazarus is ill. Lazarus and his two sisters, Mary and Martha, live in the Bethany near Jerusalem. They have a close relationship with Jesus, hosting Him in their home and learning from Him.

When Lazarus falls ill, his sisters immediately send word to Jesus. Over the objections of His disciples, Jesus intends to go back to visit them. But He intentionally delays His journey by two days. During this delay, Lazarus's illness progresses and ultimately leads to his death. Jesus discerns Lazarus's passing and informs His disciples it is time to take a trip to visit their friends (John 11:7, 11).

Throughout Jesus' earthly ministry, His disciples have trouble with His use of figurative language. In response to the disciples' misunderstanding, Jesus now

speaks without figurative language: their friend *Lazarus is dead*. Jesus has divine knowledge of the situation.

15. Jesus begins an explanation for why He has not departed for Bethany sooner. That explanation focuses on the need for the disciples to *believe*. Jesus understands that Lazarus's death will serve a divine purpose. Even to this point in the Gospel accounts, lack of belief lingers among Jesus' followers. This problem must be—and will be—addressed. By waiting until Lazarus has died, Jesus positions Himself to do so.

Jesus uses the word *nevertheless* to transition away from the disciples' concerns and move the conversation forward. He invites His disciples to accompany Him back to Bethany.

16. Typically, Peter is the outspoken disciple (Matthew 16:15–16; Luke 12:41; John 6:68–69; 13:6), but this time it is *Thomas* who speaks up. The verse gives him a second name: *Didymus*, which means “twin.” There are four listings of the original 12 apostles in the New Testament (Matthew 10:2–4; Mark 3:16–19; Luke 6:13–16; Acts 1:13). The placing of Thomas in the ordering of the four listings is seventh, eighth, eighth, and sixth, respectively.

The disciples are hesitant to make the trip because the Jews in Judea had already tried to stone Jesus. Seeing that Jesus is deter-

mined to return despite the danger, Thomas makes the bold statement we see here—not to Jesus but to Thomas’s *fellow disciples*.

II. Heavenly Realities

John 14:5–8

5 Thomas saith unto him, Lord, we know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way?

6 Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.

7 If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also: and from henceforth ye know him, and have seen him.

8 Philip saith unto him, Lord, shew us the Father, and it sufficeth us.

5. We jump to the next time Thomas is featured by name. Jesus is in His final week. On His last observance of the Passover, Jesus washes His disciples’ feet (John 13:1–17). He also predicts His betrayal (13:18–30) and Peter’s denial (13:31–38). The disciples become distressed and confused, so Jesus begins to teach again, comforting them. Jesus says that He is going “to prepare a place” for them (14:2). His words regarding both a destination and a way to get there prompt a question from Thomas (14:4).

The question from *Thomas* asks about both the destination (*whither thou goest*) and the way to get there (*How can we know?*). Thomas is likely thinking of specific, earthly directions—something concrete, like an address. His response reveals desire: Thomas wants to go where Jesus is going, but he doesn’t feel like he has enough information. Jesus speaks of a spiritual and heavenly reality, while Thomas contemplates a physical location.

6a. Regarding Thomas’s query about life’s destination and how to get there, Jesus begins with the latter: Jesus Himself

is *the way*. This is one of seven statements in the Gospel of John that begin “I am the . . .” as self-identifiers for Jesus. Each unveils a unique facet of Jesus’ identity as they firmly declare His divinity. The particular “I am” statement now before us reveals Jesus Himself as the guide and pathway. He is the road that leads to an eternal life that is reconciled with God.

6b. Now Jesus switches from discussing how to get to the destination to specifying it. The destination is nothing less than admittance into the presence of the heavenly *Father*. Before Thomas’s query, Jesus spoke of the nature of that presence in terms of the “Father’s house” (John 14:2–3). Jesus promises that He will be there with His disciples (14:4).

7. There is a unity between the Father and Son that is difficult to put into words. But when a believer knows one, that believer knows something of the other. In fact, knowledge of the Father is conditional on knowing Jesus. This is a challenge to the disciples: Do they really know the Son?

8. This reaction reveals that the disciples continue to struggle to understand Jesus’ teaching. *Philip* voices their lack of understanding this time by asking Jesus to *shew* them the Father. His request reveals a continuing misunderstanding regarding the connection between Jesus and the Father.

III. Resurrection Appearances

John 20:24–29

24 But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came.

25 The other disciples therefore said unto him, We have seen the Lord. But he said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe.

26 And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them: then came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, Peace be unto you.

27 Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing.

28 And Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God.

29 Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.

24–25a. Jesus appeared personally and in the flesh to several people on the day of His resurrection. Even so, doubts lingered and would continue to linger over the weeks ahead. The most articulate of these comes from the apostle Thomas.

The phrase *when Jesus came* refers to His appearance in John 20:19–23. It's easy to imagine that the declaration *We have seen the Lord* is the very first thing spoken to Thomas when he rejoins the group.

25b. This is where the derogatory phrase “doubting Thomas” originates. Eyewitness accounts of his fellow disciples are not good enough for Thomas. He declares his need for physical, tangible evidence. Belief in disembodied spirits was common in the ancient world, and Thomas wants firsthand proof that the claim of Jesus' resurrection is more than a ghost story.

26. Waiting several *days*, Jesus is in no hurry to prove Himself to *Thomas*.

27. Jesus, who is very well aware of Thomas's doubt, addresses him directly with the invitation we see here. Worthy of note is the fact that Jesus' invitation exactly mirrors Thomas's stated demand to personally examine Jesus' *hands* and *side*.

28. John does not specify whether

Thomas reaches out and touches Jesus' body. Instead, the text suggests that Thomas believes without touching Jesus' side. He responds to Jesus with a personal confession of faith in his *Lord* and *God*.

29. Bible scholars are divided on whether Jesus' response is a reprimand. On the one hand, those who view it as a rebuke argue that Thomas should have believed on the basis of the eyewitness testimony of the other disciples. On the other hand, the other disciples themselves did not believe until they encountered the risen Christ and saw Him personally.

The critical point is that Jesus speaks a message for an audience beyond Thomas—the message reaches toward future generations, toward us today. There is blessing in believing without having firsthand knowledge.

IV. At the Sea of Galilee

John 21:1–2

1 After these things Jesus shewed himself again to the disciples at the sea of Tiberias; and on this wise shewed he himself.

2 There were together Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee, and two other of his disciples.

1. Here we catch one more glimpse of the risen Christ with His *disciples*. Jesus' appearance here is in line with Matthew 26:32; 28:7; Mark 14:28; 16:7.

2. Jesus' post-resurrection appearances number about a dozen, depending on how textual overlaps are counted. Collective witness increases the credibility of the testimony. In this particular appearance, John notes the presence of seven disciples, with Thomas named second. Thomas is poised to observe another miracle (John 21:6) and Peter's restoration (21:15–19).

Involvement Learning

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Into the Lesson

Write down one true thing about yourself.

We all have doubts and questions—some are inconsequential curiosities, but others have real significance to our faith and worldview. In today's lesson, notice the main character's questions and doubts. Consider the ways you relate to him.

Into the Word

Read John 11:1–15. Write down exactly what Jesus said in verses 4, 7, 11, and 14–15, then write what He meant in each statement.

Verse 4: _____

Verse 7: _____

Verse 11: _____

Verses 14–15: _____

Write down what Thomas and the other disciples may have *thought* Jesus meant beside each statement.

Verse 4: _____

Verse 7: _____

Verse 11: _____

Verses 14–15: _____

Read John 20:24–29. What part of this account is most significant to you? Why?

Read John 21:1–2. How is Thomas's presence among this group meaningful to you?

Key Text

Then saith [Jesus] to Thomas,
Reach hither thy finger, and behold
my hands; and reach hither thy hand,
and thrust it into my side:
and be not faithless, but believing.
—John 20:27

Into Life

Questions and doubts are inevitable from time to time. Jesus is gracious with our needs, and He wants us to trust Him even when we don't understand. Write down one question or doubt you have in faith.

Thought to Remember

Jesus meets us in our doubts.