

Believing Thomas

John 20: 19-31

**First Presbyterian Church
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How can you not love Thomas? He was our man on the scene. He was the realist, the guy who wanted concrete evidence not airy-fairy spirituality. He has been known throughout history as “Doubting Thomas.” Thomas is a beloved figure because so many of us find an immediate identification with him.

Thomas was the one who was in the kitchen when the final touchdown was scored. He was with us when we missed the one confirmation class in which the meaning of life and God was explained. Thomas understands that we don’t get the joke everyone else thought was hilarious. Were you scratching a mosquito bite when the meteor flamed a trail across the night sky? Thomas missed it, too. Can you imagine being the only one out of the room when the resurrected Christ appeared? That would be just the luck of Thomas.

For some reason, he was not with the other disciples that Sunday evening when Jesus appeared within the locked doors of the house and said, “Peace be with you!” Where was Thomas? Maybe he had gone for a walk, to get away for a while and think about what the future would hold now that Jesus was gone. Perhaps he was striking up old relationships with friends and family in Jerusalem. After three years of following Jesus, it was time to start life over again. Maybe he was in a tavern trying to put some distance between himself and the last week.

For whatever reason, Thomas missed the visit from the resurrected Jesus. When Thomas finally got back, the others told him, “We have seen the Lord!” But Thomas didn’t believe them. His closest friends told him a story too incredible for him to believe. Thomas had witnessed the trial and crucifixion. Shock was turning to acceptance within him: Jesus was dead. He did not want to risk the emotional upheaval of getting his hopes dashed again. “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.” In other words, it has got to be absolutely, verifiably, literally, physically, historically true or, no matter what you say, I am not in on this resurrection business.

That’s our man on the scene! I love Thomas for his demands. Without realizing it, Thomas anticipated the watery theology that would begin in the church

almost immediately and continue to the present day. As we know from Paul's writings to the Corinthians, people have been trying to spiritualize the resurrection from the start. After all, bodies just don't get up from the dead. This has to be a metaphor, a feeling, about what *seemed* to happen. Revisionist scholars assert that it was the power of Jesus' life and teachings that lived on in the disciples. Perhaps some spiritual appearing occurred that motivated the disciples to carry on Jesus' mission even though they knew his actual body was still dead and decomposing. They speak of the "resurrection event" as a bright experience of meaning which the disciples projected back onto Jesus. In this way of thinking, just as spring follows winter, and the dying of one life gives life to another, so Christians celebrate the rising of Jesus as the continuation of his ethics and ideas through his body—not his literal body, but his body the church. Thus Christianity is compatible with all the other myths of the dying and rising god that are merely symbolic. Resurrection is just a helpful sign of hope for all of us who are doing the best we can to muddle along in a world where the truth about God is all a mystery.

And to all that, our man Thomas would say, "Trash! Show me the body. I want the God who became flesh to show me that carcass walking around again or I'm not buying any of it. Keep your symbols and your spirituality. I'm going back to fishing. I'm going back to something real squirming around in my net, something I can eat, or sell for cash. I want the real, not this religious bunk." Thomas wanted to see Jesus alive in the flesh, or he wanted out of the whole thing. I love Thomas because he keeps Christian faith right on point. We have a religion that is not only spiritual. It is historical, based on events which occurred in the real world of dust and swiftly passing time. God entered the real world, and Thomas holds us fast to that shattering news as the only thing worth accepting in Christianity. Otherwise, junk it and live for yourself.

Thomas also frees us to ask our questions. We like him because he said what we all think from time to time. How do I know any of this is true? Thirty-five years of ordained ministry, and I ask that question at least once a month. Oh, pastors have dark doubts. Some moments, it seems the stupidest thing in the world to believe in the resurrection. Dead people don't get up. How did this religion ever catch on? It's way more of a stretch than the visions of Joseph Smith or Mohammed. Why would anyone risk their lives to affirm that something so obviously symbolic is the literal truth?

Thomas had two powerful personality traits combining in him. He was a realist and a loyalist. When Jesus' friend Lazarus had died, he made ready to go back to the region of Judea. His disciples warned Jesus that the Jews there wanted

to kill him. But Jesus insisted. So Thomas said, “Let us also go, that we may die with him” (Jn. 11: 16). He was a realist: going to Judea means those people will kill you. But he was a loyalist: if you’re going to get killed, I’m going with you.

On Jesus’ last night, he spoke some of the most comforting words ever uttered to his disciples. “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am, you may be also. And you know the way to where I am going.” Beautiful words. But sort of spiritual. Too abstract for the realist Thomas. “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Thomas is loyal. He calls Jesus Lord. He’s willing to follow Jesus down any path. But he just doesn’t get the spiritual bit. He’s a realist. How can we know the way if we don’t know the destination? Of course, Thomas provides the set up for one of the key texts in all of Scripture. Jesus replies to Thomas, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14: 6). Is that concrete enough for you, dear Thomas? The Father is the destination, and I am the way. Stick to me, and you’ll get to the goal.

Yes, Thomas doubted the resurrection. It went against his realist bent. And there was nothing wrong with his doubts. There’s nothing wrong with *our* doubts. It’s part of holding such an extraordinary faith in the midst of a suffering, chaotic world. But let’s note the character of Thomas in his doubting. First, he was not an outsider looking in, taking pot shots at credulous believers. He had committed his life to following Jesus. It cost him. He had been there when Jesus taught. He had passed out the five loaves and two fish that fed five thousand. He had shared in the holy cup and the broken bread. He saw Jesus taken away to death, and his own life had been on the line.

Inside the faith is the most honorable position for doubters. There is no such thing as standing objectively aloof from all faiths. That in itself is a faith position. It is the position that truth cannot be known, or does not exist. That is a worldview to which one commits; such agnosticism is its own kind of faith, no matter how much it hides under the cloak of “scientific objectivism.” Thomas doubted from the position of having thrown his hat into the ring. He put his heart and soul into Jesus for three years.

Second, Thomas did not want to stay in his doubt. He wanted to move into an experience of Jesus raised from the dead. He just needed to be addressed in his realism. He needed something concrete. When that came, he gave up his doubt immediately and believed.

Some of us, on the other hand, hold onto our doubts like a blanket in the night. They keep us comfortable in the midst of a God who makes a claim on our lives. Our doubts keep us safe from the hound of heaven whose love pursues us relentlessly. When we wish to stay in ourselves, in control of our lives, doubt is a convenient cover. There are classic questions of doubt within which we could stay all our lives. “What about the people that have never heard of Jesus? Why do good people suffer? Why did God allow evil in the first place?” These questions nag at all believers, for they cannot be fully answered in this life. We wrestle with them as long as we live.

What we have to check, though, is what is behind such a question if it continues to keep us from answering Christ’s summons to follow him. Behind our doubts may be worry for a loved one who never believed, or even a worry about ourselves. What if I don’t answer the call of Christ to be a sheep of his flock and a child of his heart? Let’s deflect any talk of consequence, for I’m not sure I can give myself fully to God. His call frightens me. What if I give him my life and I get lost? What if he hurts me? Please, let’s talk about other questions and not me.

Thomas was a realist who had doubts. He was also a loyalist, ready to believe when his doubts were answered. Jesus came to him, and showed him his wounds. “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put your hand and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve but believe.” There is no record of whether Thomas actually touched Jesus or not. Perhaps seeing Jesus and hearing his invitation was enough. Thomas’ demands melted away. He believed, and more than believed. Doubting Thomas made the boldest, most direct declaration about Jesus recorded in Scripture: *My Lord and my God!* Doubting Thomas, he has been called through the centuries. He should really be called *Believing Thomas*. What others missed, he grasped: Jesus risen is Lord and God of all.

Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” If this were a film, it would be like Jesus turning to the camera. He looks right at us: blessed are you who have not seen, and yet believe. Thomas has been our man on the spot. He is the one who did not see at first, then saw. He is the one asked to believe the testimony of eye-witnesses who could not. He demanded a personal appearance, and he got one. Jesus came to Thomas as the one who represents all of us who were not there. Look, Jesus is not going to come to you bodily. He has ascended to heaven, and there remains until his final return. If you demand a concrete appearance, get over it. You and I have been given Thomas. He is the realist who insisted on verification. He got it. And when he saw, he gave over his heart, his mind, his life

in a stunning confession: My Lord and My God! Now he asks us to trust him. He is the guy who needed concrete evidence and he got it. It's too late for us to get it, but we have Thomas. We have a guy who is a big realist, and a big doubter. He comes to verify what the other witnesses saw. Jesus is risen. It's the truth.

Now the mystical reality of faith in Jesus is that the once and for all event of Jesus' days among us, of his cross and resurrection, can cross time and come into our immediate experience. Time and space are no obstacles. The witnesses have passed the story from one generation to the next. Thomas saw, and he told. Others believed and received the truth of the resurrection in their very bones. The Spirit came within them and brought about a sense of Christ's presence they had never had before. He brought power for changed lives. He brought forgiveness and peace. He brought power to tell others. And they experienced the truth. And they told others, and they told others, and now I'm telling you.

At the end of our passage, John writes, "Now Jesus did many other signs...which are not written in this book, but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (20: 30-1). Jesus is risen. It is a fact in the real world. It is true in history and time. He is the center around which everything revolves. That fact, outside of us, and 2,000 years removed from us, can be a present reality in our lives. The truth of that historical event can flood the heart and change our lives. It comes to us, and joins us to all the other Christians in a mystical fellowship of depth like no other relationships on earth.

How can we get in on that? How can we go deeper? Thomas is our man. Jesus said to him, "Do not disbelieve, but believe." That simple. Don't let your doubts be a smokescreen. Deal with them not as an outsider, but an insider. Lay down your resistance. Trust him. Trust the witness. Stop disbelieving. Believe. It's a choice. It's the choice of a realist named Thomas who was also courageous enough to be a loyalist. He would follow the truth wherever it led him.

It led him to see the resurrected Jesus and say on behalf of all us: My Lord and my God! Thomas bears witness: I wasn't there and I did not believe. Then I saw with my own eyes. And I'm your man. I'm the man for all of you who weren't there: it's true. It's real. Believe. Jesus is alive and he is God.