

FAITH AND DOUBT

A Sermon on Acts 2:14a, 22-32, I Peter 1:3-9, John 20:19-31

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Mention the name “Thomas,” in the context of a Biblical discussion, and the very next word that comes to our lips is the word, *doubt*. As a result of the incident recorded in the 20th chapter of John’s Gospel, Thomas will forevermore be remembered as, “Doubting Thomas,” and we evoke his name when we want to *chastise* someone for their lack of faith: “oh, don’t be such a Doubting Thomas. Have a little *faith*.”

The other disciples, apparently, knew him by a different nickname. They called him, “the Twin.” And although we actually know very little other than that about Thomas, I have come to the conclusion that of all the disciples, he is probably my personal *favorite*. And so I want us to *reflect* on Thomas this morning, and why I think being called a “Doubting Thomas” ought to actually be considered a *compliment* rather than an *insult*.

First of all, let me point out that the writers of the first three Gospels tell us absolutely nothing about Thomas. They simply include his name in the list of the twelve. And while we shouldn’t read a great deal into that, I find it completely consistent with what John writes about him. Envision Thomas not as one of the “leaders” of the group: not a Peter, or a James or John. Those disciples were much more *outspoken*, and therefore a good bit deal more is known about them. And the truth be known, most of it is not so good. Far greater than *doubting* Jesus, Peter is the one who out and out *denied* him – not once, but *three times*, on the night of his betrayal.

And James and John were the ones who all caught up in the “Apostolic power structure,” pushing Jesus for who he would name as his “right hand man,” wanting to be “the greatest” in the kingdom. Jesus had particularly harsh words for those brothers when they talked that way.

But picture Thomas as a quiet, reflective person — the kind of person who is always *observing* what is happening, taking it all in, and certainly *pondering* its meaning, but who often has little if anything to *say* about it. Most of the time, but not *always*.

In John's account alone, Thomas speaks, on three separate occasions. And each one is significant. When people like Thomas *do* speak, it is *always* important and worth hearing.

The first time we hear from Thomas, it is already late in Jesus' ministry (when he was in danger of being arrested). Jesus' friend, Lazarus is dead, and Jesus has suggested that they all go to Bethany where the body is — to Bethany, just outside of Jerusalem itself.

The disciples are concerned for Jesus' safety . . . and let's be honest, for their own: "Rabbi, the Jews were but now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?"

But Thomas (alone, apparently) has recognized that something far more important than their safety is going on here. He has been listening to Jesus' words about "living in the light," and the *power* of God. And so Thomas becomes what one commentator has called, "a pillar of strength" among the apostles. Thomas! "Doubting Thomas." A "pillar of strength!" *Thomas* is the one who speaks up and says, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." And without further debate, they go to Bethany, and witness the miracle Jesus performs there.

The second encounter with Thomas in John's account is on the night of Jesus' arrest. Having predicted that Peter — even the great *Peter* — would fall away before the night was through, Jesus turned to words of comfort: "Let not your hearts be troubled," he said. And he spoke in cryptic words about his "going away," and "preparing a place" for them. And then he said, "you know the way where I am going."

The disciples sat in amazement, in fear, in wonder. Who knows what they were thinking and feeling at that moment. Peter had already spoken, and now sat in silence. . . as did the other normally outspoken ones. And it was *Thomas* who finally broke the ice — who spoke, who *probed*, because he was *listening*, and he didn't *understand*, and he wanted to know what Jesus *meant*. It is *Thomas* who famously asked, "Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?"

And then, *prompted by Thomas' question*, Jesus spoke those most comforting words, words to which we cling especially at difficult moments in our lives: "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Would he have said them if Thomas hadn't been there, hadn't been "paying attention," hadn't *pushed* the issue with Jesus? Maybe. But the point is, he *did* say them, and he said them in response to one who was willing to question, and probe, who wanted to *know*, and not just follow Jesus "blindly."

I have a deep appreciation for Thomas, and for all the “Thomases” of this world. They are the ones who keep us on track, who call us to task when our meaning isn’t clear, or when we are inconsistent or vague.

Thomases can be a *challenge*, because they aren’t easily satisfied, and they absolutely refuse to be “pacified.” But then you see, when a Thomas *is* satisfied, it really *means* something.

It was “Easter evening.” The long eventful “day of Resurrection” was drawing to a close. For “fear of the Jews,” the disciples were meeting behind locked doors, no doubt trying to sort it all out by reflecting on the day’s experiences. Thomas was not present when Jesus appeared, and so when they told him about it, he was *skeptical*. After all, he had *seen* the nails and the spear. He *knew* Jesus was *really dead*. He was *there*. It’s not that he was unwilling to believe. And it wasn’t that he was weak. Thomas was their “pillar of strength,” remember. But needed *proof*. He needed to *see* the scars and *touch* them.

Eight days later, Thomas had his chance. Thomas, whose word really *meant* something, was not *chastised* by Jesus. “Put your finger here.” And Thomas said, “My Lord, and my God!”

Thomas is my favorite of the apostles. Because Thomas had courage to go where others were frightened to go, we know that we can follow where our Lord leads us. Because when he didn’t understand something Thomas *said* so, and came to understand and accept the answers he was given, we too can *understand* that Jesus is in fact the way, the truth, and the life. And because Thomas *doubted*, and then *as a result* received the proof he needed, we too can believe.

Thomas was a *skeptic*, with a keen power of observation, and a willingness to be honest and forthright about his doubts, and his questions. When Thomas said, “my Lord, and my God!” it really *meant* something! If Thomas was convinced, then it really, *truly* must have happened.

Paul Tillich, in his classic book, *Dynamics of Faith*, suggests that rather than being the *opposite* of belief, doubt is really a necessary ingredient of belief. Until we have *questioned* our faith, and our faith has *passed the test* of our questioning, our faith will be very shallow.

So Thomas is also my favorite apostle because he “models” that “road” from doubt *to* faith that we all need to walk, and that I believe we all *do* walk from time to time.

On Easter morning, we can easily get “caught up” in the excitement of the music, the flowers, the sheer joyfulness of the moment, and all the rest, and believe simply because believing “feels” good and right.

But on this Sunday *after* the “big day,” the Sunday called, “Low Sunday” on some church calendars, the time has come to be more *reflective*. The time has come to consider those *other* times in our lives, when believing is *challenging*, and when we, too, need “proof.”

The *message* of the story of Thomas is that if we *embark* on that journey, God will meet us on the road, and we will *find* the proof we need. And in fact, our faith will be *stronger* for it. We will be more confident in our faith, more *sure* of ourselves, and as a result, we will be more committed disciples.

The story of Thomas is not the story of a doubter. It is the story of a doubter, of a *skeptic*, who *believed*. And I urge *you* to be honest with God about your questions, and yes, your doubts. Be honest with *yourself*, because a time will come when you *need* your faith. And if it is shallow and unexamined, your struggle will be all the greater.

Consider Thomas, and walk that path with him. And then you will soon be one who proclaims with deep conviction, “my Lord, and my God.”

And to God be the Glory.