

Doubting Thomas

On that first Easter night, ten of the disciples were overjoyed to see the risen Lord, who visited them in the Upper Room (19-23). Thomas was absent from this first Easter Sunday experience, and, as we'll see in our text, was not of a mind to believe his colleagues had actually seen the Lord in the flesh.

Follow the New Testament reading from **John 20:24-31**:

²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

We're all familiar with the epithet, "Doubting Thomas." We use this term to describe anyone who has a skeptical bent, and it's almost always used in a derogatory way. *Webster's Dictionary* has the entry, "doubting Thomas," as "a habitually doubtful person." And, in fact, the first impression our text gives us of Thomas isn't a very favorable one. But as we consider the entire text, we'll gain perhaps a new appreciation for Thomas. More importantly, we can identify with him in our personal struggles with doubts and our growth toward a mature faith.

We pick on Thomas because he was alone in his doubt. On Resurrection Sunday the other disciples were privileged to see the Lord in his appearance to them, commissioning of them, and breathing the Holy Spirit into them. For whatever reason, Thomas wasn't there. Had almost any of the others not been there, they too might've been doubters until they'd seen Jesus for themselves.

Most who reflect on Thomas' character surmise that he was of a melancholy disposition. He was a pessimist, who tended to see the glass as "half empty instead of half full." And his pessimism may've contributed to his absence from the gathering of the disciples when Jesus appeared on that first Easter Sunday evening. He was alone, possibly sulking and brooding over his ominous future. Had he been there on that Resurrection night, he wouldn't have been "the doubter of the week." For whatever reasons, Thomas was at least a temporary doubter. His reaction to the testimony of the other disciples at first shows an almost modern proclivity to unbelief, but on closer inspection, his doubt was temporary, and we realize we've all been there.

Os Guinness wrote about the pilgrimage from doubt to faith in his book *In Two Minds: The Dilemma of Doubt and How to Resolve It*. He explains that the word "doubt" is from the Latin "dubitare," which means "two." To believe is to be in one mind. To disbelieve is to be in one mind also, the mind to reject a certain truth. To doubt is to waver between the two minds, and to be in a state of "double-ness," or "two-ness." Hopefully, this state of mind called doubt is a temporary one, and a stage of transition from unbelief to faith. I believe that doubt is a necessary experience in the pilgrimage of faith. As Guinness says, only God and certain madmen have no doubts.

Doubt is that experience of considering something, asking questions, and then moving beyond that doubt to new certainty. We don't get bogged down in doubt that hardens into militant unbelief, nor do we say we believe something without giving it serious consideration. There are many in the membership of the church today who've not given serious thought to the verity of the faith. They simply go along with the decision of others. Many have never thought through the truth claims of Christ and the Word, and thus cannot discern the error of false teachings.

The Christian faith requires that we believe what we cannot see with our eyes. Hebrews 11:1 says "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." But though we believe without seeing, we don't believe without considering (FF Bruce). Faith is not blind credulity and unthinking naiveté. I rather think Thomas had a desire to consider the truth of Jesus' resurrection.

Admittedly, some people have a greater inclination to doubt, just as some find it easier to believe. I was nurtured in the faith as a child, and my conversion came without a lot of struggle with doubt. My struggles came later, in high school and college, as I confronted ideas and issues that made me reexamine my faith. I was often in two minds, and had to resolve doubts. But that was the way I grew in faith and understanding. Admittedly, I still have my moments of doubt when my faith is challenged by the mysteries of life and truth. In John's Gospel we see that Thomas was pessimistic by disposition, yet fiercely loyal (Jn. 11:16; 14:5). He tended to look on the dark side of things, and naturally struggled more with doubt than those of a more optimistic and cheerful disposition.

I remember a deacon in a church I served in a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio. This good man was from Tennessee, and had difficulty finding anything good about Cleveland, especially about its weather. He tended to see the dark side of just about anything. It was early spring, about this time of the year. We were finally beginning to pull out of a typically long, harsh and dreary winter. This particular Sunday morning, and I believe it was Easter Sunday, was unusually beautiful, sunny and warm. As I approached Cody in the hallway that morning, I thought, "What negative thing could he possibly say about this glorious day?" So, I said to him as cheerily as I could, "Good morning, Cody. It's a great day, isn't it?" "Yeah," he admitted begrudgingly. "But we'll pay for it tomorrow!" Poor fellow, he couldn't enjoy today for dreading tomorrow. But, thankfully, Cody Williams overcame his tendency to pessimism and doubt, and was a believer in the Lord Jesus, by the grace of God. I believe all true believers have spent some time in a state of doubt, and some more than others. But we shouldn't live there.

Doubt isn't the opposite of belief and faith. Doubt can work with faith, as we question the evidence and move on to greater faith. Unbelief, not doubt, is the opposite of faith/belief. Like the first disciples, including Thomas, we're to move beyond the state of questioning, considering and being in two minds about a matter.

The Chinese have a parable about doubt as the futile attempt to have one's feet in two boats. Sooner or later you have to commit to one boat or the other, because eventually they will take you in different directions. To doubt is to delay, to hesitate between two opinions, and one who remains in doubt will eventually drown in the depths of unbelief.

How graciously the Lord accommodated himself to Thomas' doubt by making this special appearance the following Sunday night, in the same place and the same manner as he did the week before! Just as with the other disciples on Easter Sunday night, Jesus didn't come to them and say, "Shame on you!" He said to disciples who had forsaken and denied him, "Peace be with you." Jesus once again miraculously appeared in the locked room and spoke these gracious words. Jesus appeared this time specifically to meet Thomas' previously stated criterion for belief—that he put his hand into Jesus' scars in his hands and side, an offer Thomas found unnecessary. Seeing Jesus was enough for Thomas, who responded to Jesus with his worshipful confession of faith.

The disciples and Thomas had the unique experience of seeing Jesus in the flesh, and even of experiencing his full humanity, though now he was in his resurrection body. Jesus was resurrected with an immortal body, but it wasn't as a spirit that he was resurrected. His risen body was material, visible, tangible, and palpable. Yes, he could appear with a thought, and was no longer limited by time and space as he was during his 33 years of incarnation before the resurrection. Though different from his mortal body, his resurrection body was real, as real as our bodies.

Jesus said after Thomas' confession of faith that Thomas believed because he had seen, but blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. He's referring to us. God brings us evidence of the gospel through the Word. It's not a word about something mystical, but is the Word of God about his dealings in human history and about God's becoming a man in Jesus. It's a word about events that happened on this earth at a particular time in real history—Jesus' life, suffering, death, and resurrection. It's the Word calling us to confess and repent of sin, and believe in Jesus and follow him as Lord. This Word that brings salvation is as real, close, and life-changing as the presence of the resurrection body of Jesus there in that Upper Room (Rom. 10: 14-17).

Peter writes in his first letter, "For you have been born again...through the living and enduring word of God" (1 Pet. 1:23).

God brings the evidence we need for faith in Jesus. He gives us the evidence of the Word and the testimony of believers. This is a reminder to us who are believers that God uses us to lovingly and patiently bring with us those who are doubters and maybe even cynics. We shouldn't be fearful of or impatient with those who seem to be resistant to the truth, and who ask us hard and even offensive questions. Rather, we must be faithful in our witness, hopeful in our praying, and loving in our leading

them to the place where they'll hear a saving word from God. The other disciples apparently didn't condemn Thomas, but quietly said to themselves, "You'll see for yourself and believe as we do."

Someone said that Thomas' problem was not so much his doubt as it was his absenteeism. In fact, Scripture tells us that faith doesn't come about apart from evidence, but rather through the preaching and hearing of the word of Christ (Rom. 10:17). Had he been with them on that first Easter Sunday night, he also would've believed. Faith is encouraged in the context of corporate worship, when we hear the word preached and sense the power of the presence of God (1 Cor. 14:24f). Faith is awakened in the minds and hearts of those willing to consider the evidence. Saving evidence comes through the Word and by the Holy Spirit, working through the reading, preaching and teaching of the Word, and confirmed in the testimony of believers. Those who absent themselves from worship, Bible reading and the fellowship of God's people are growing weaker in faith.

In the words of a Greek scholar, Jesus literally said to Thomas, "Stop becoming unbelieving, and start becoming believing" (AT Robertson). In his pilgrimage of faith, Thomas had his admission of doubt, and moved on to his acceptance of the evidence for faith. The final stage of his experience was the assurance of faith. Thomas' faith sounds forth with joyous assurance.

We all know the skeptic's motto, "seeing is believing." That's what Thomas evidenced early on in our text. But when the Lord appeared to him, he responded with faith, and was thereby enabled to see/perceive something known only by faith, that is, the significance of the person of Jesus. Sense perception is not enough. When Thomas experienced the Lord Jesus, he was given grace to believe. He didn't even need to touch the wounds, a criterion he had earlier demanded. On the other hand, without grace to believe, it's possible to see overwhelming evidence and still not believe. But, for Thomas and for all people of faith, "believing is seeing." Thomas' seeing was met with God-given faith, which enabled him to make the great confession of faith.

Thomas' assurance of faith came by the confession of faith. Thomas was no longer the doubter as he exclaimed, "*My Lord and my God!*" What a statement of faith it was, directed toward the one who was crucified in total weakness and shame! Yet now he says Jesus is Lord over the religious and political empires that crucified him about ten days before. God-given faith alone allows us to believe that the Jesus who was crucified in weakness is now the risen, reigning Lord and God. Grace alone leads us to believe in and follow the Crucified, the one who saved us by his suffering and death, and who calls us to take this same path of weakness, suffering and death to self.

Thomas not only believed in the resurrection of Jesus, but now he believed in all his claims. It's not enough just to believe he arose, but that he lives as Lord and God. Thomas' assurance of faith came by the possession of faith. Thomas said with unequivocal conviction, "*My Lord and my God!*" Not only did Thomas possess Jesus. Jesus possessed Thomas. Tradition says that Thomas became an apostolic missionary, taking the gospel to India. He became one who believed in, loved and served Jesus as his Lord and Savior.

I've heard people reject the message of the gospel and the offer of eternal life, saying, "I'm just a doubting Thomas." Thomas doubted for only a week. Jesus says, "Stop doubting and believe." Thomas the Doubter became Thomas the Missionary, all because he admitted his doubt, accepted the evidence, and came into the subsequent assurance of faith. We need the possession of a personal faith in Jesus Christ. The faith to which John's Gospel calls us is not adherence to a creed, but "a dynamic believing in the person of Jesus" (Borchert).

We're either a doubting Thomas or we're a believing Thomas. We cannot keep our feet in two boats. Eventually two boats will shove off in different directions. We must honestly look at the evidence and believe.