

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Burt L. Burleson

“What’s it Like Being Thomas?”

John 20: 19-31

April 25, 2004

I want to tell you this morning... something of what it’s like to be Thomas.

He was born this way, you know. Came forth from the womb saying things like, **Why? And how come? And how can we be sure?**

He frustrated his parents because he was all the time poking around here and there where he shouldn’t be. He was always taking his toys a part to see how it was that they worked. And often times... he couldn’t get them back together.

So... he frustrated himself.

And his teachers too. Down at the synagogue... way too many questions. **“Just listen to the flannel graph story and work on your bible drill. Go color something.”**

But he wouldn’t color. **“How do we know for sure about all the things that Sampson did? Did the flood really cover the entire earth? Why won’t God talk out loud to me like He did to Moses? Why won’t God heal my lame friend down the street, he’s such a kind person?”**

This was the litany that Thomas lived with.

It’s the way he was born...

the way he was made.

And sometimes he offered up his litany for others to hear... but the older he got, the more he just kept it to himself. It was cute when he was little but somewhere along the way, it was clear to him that who he was wasn’t acceptable.

So, he was quieter...

especially down at the synagogue.

Which was still, oddly enough, a place he loved to be. With such large questions and with so many of them, he always knew at some deep level, this was the only place that could hold and tell a large enough truth.

Thomas was deeply spiritual. Even as he questioned... he prayed. Such was the tug-of-war Thomas lived.

And at night he would pray, **“Lord, take this away... all this wavering and ambivalence... Take it away. Why can’t it be easy?”** He would fall asleep with that honest prayer on his lips and wake up, still as “Thomas” as ever.

This was the way things were in Thomas’ heart. And you might wonder why he didn’t just punt. Well, it was because things happened along the way.

He encountered such amazing joy and beauty in life.

He was touched by people with such love.

He kept hearing stories of faith that captivated him so.

And from time to time he was hearing a still small voice, a reassuring voice, that must have been God... and occasionally there were these epiphanies... And now and again he was filled up with such life and spirit that he had to say **“Yes... yes...”** to God and God’s world and God’s graceful presence in his life.

It’s no wonder when Jesus passed his way that Thomas hooked up with him right off.

First of all, Jesus seemed to be on the outside, in trouble with the powers that be... the religious consensus. Thomas had lived in that lonely place and anytime he met a soul mate of that sort, it was like a cool cup of water in the desert. Pure salvation.

Second... it was the way Jesus talked and taught... All those parables designed to turn everyone upside down so that **“seeing they would not see and hearing they would not hear.”** All those disarming and disorienting sayings like, **“Be born again.”** And **“hate your mother.”** And **“if you want to find it you’ll have to lose it first.”**

Finally... mostly... it was that Jesus was just so... human... such a real person. Like everything truly human was being blessed in this one man. Jesus left nothing and no one unblessed... Thomas included...

So, he said **“yes”** and he followed Jesus.

Then Jesus died. Thomas... being the glass-half-empty kind of guy he was. Wasn’t surprised. He knew exactly what would happen in Jerusalem and even had said out loud to the rest of the disciples that it was time to go die with him.

But they didn’t... he didn’t. He ran.

And even though he wasn't surprised, his world was still shattered. And he spent the weekend in hopeless darkness. The others got together on Sunday but not Thomas.

A classic introvert, he's down in a hopeless hole by himself. So, he skips Sunday night church, which is reason enough to make him the Patron Saint of DaySpring.

But, of course, he misses that great moment...

when Jesus is there in their midst, alive,

blessing them and filling them and sending them.

Wouldn't you know it, the guy who most needed to see and have a personal encounter with his resurrected friend, wasn't there. Seemed like it was always that way for Thomas... missing out on the miracle he needed. That's Thomas' story, hearing others talk easily of faith and God's work and him feeling like there was a miracle party and he hadn't been invited.

Well... the others found him fast and told him. There were lots of them and they all had an honest to God, face to face, breathed on moment with Jesus. They all concur, "**The Lord is alive.**"

And they're his friends...

and he trusts them.

And Thomas wants it to be true.

But, for him, there's a difference in wanting it to be true and believing it is... And with that familiar bit of ambivalence bouncing around in his brain he can't bring himself to say, "**Hallelujah!**"

That's something of what it's like to be Thomas, right? ... Some of you know... don't you. Where so many things aren't black and white... and where there's always so many sides to most every issue... And you can see it this way and that way. And you wish you were one who could make up your mind but you can't.

Can you imagine Thomas looking at the menu at TGI Fridays? "**This looks good but that looks good too.**" Way too many options, here.

"**Just nail it down for goodness sakes, Thomas.**" Thomas wants to... he wishes he could... but this is the way God made him. And he can't decide between the mushroom burger or the chicken fried steak... And he can't decide to make his ambivalence disappear. And even with his best friends telling him so, he can't say the simple words, "**I believe.**"

This is what it's like to be Thomas and some of us know his story, not just from John's telling it but from our living it. If you have walked in Thomas' way, it's very important that you take note of what Thomas does.

Thomas is honest with his doubts... but he's also honest about where he is and about what he needs. **“Here's what I need. To see, to touch, to go deep within the wounds of Christ.”** Jesus had taught him, **“If you seek, you'll find. If you ask, you'll receive.”**

When I do spiritual direction with people, I often begin as my spiritual director began with me, **“Tell me the questions you need and want answered while your own this earthly journey.”** Because what I believe is that there are answers and God wants to give them to us. Life is an answer waiting to be received.

So, if you're like Thomas, be like Thomas and step up to the plate and tell God what you need. Write it down... show it to some person or pastor... talk about it.

Thomas understands that his doubts are not final. He doesn't allow his questions or his ambivalence to shut him off to the truth or the search for it. He doesn't elevate his self and his inability and his cynical personality to some place of authority. He's true to his self and the way God has made him... he even doubts his doubts.

He keeps showing up.

That's wonderful to me... to see that in this story. He not only lays out what he needs but he keeps showing up, he keeps seeking. It's not easy being Thomas... and feeling like you're on the outside... never rid of all uncertainty... that's hard. But... keep showing up because the Risen Christ is going to meet you. And most likely in the community of faith.

That's what happens. Jesus shows up, **“Peace be with you,”** which is always an appropriate thing to say if you've just walked through a wall. **“Relax... Peace.”** It's also a good thing to say, when you're in a room full of folks who abandoned you... or betrayed you.

“Peace be with you” is a good thing to say in any room full of brokenness and sin... and questions... and doubt.

John, doesn't record it, but I think he was looking right at Thomas. This is always the first word... and the last word. **“Peace to you.”** Some of us are expecting, **“Shame on you. Shame on you for not believing.”**

Some of you are hearing that voice too much.
 The voice of Jesus says, **“Peace...”**
 And then offers what is needed.

And did you notice, he gives Thomas, exactly... verbatim what he asked for. **“See... touch... go into my wounds. Stop doubting and believe.”**

And Thomas does. He makes the leap of faith... and it's a quantum leap. He doesn't say, **“My friend...” “My teacher.”** Not even, **“My Messiah.”** It's **“My Lord... my God.”**

To all the Thomas' listening today... there does come a time when you need to leap. Small steps of certainty, may get you on the journey, may keep you on the journey... but they won't get you to that destination, not ultimately. Certainty isn't an option. Only trust. You don't get to what is eternal with what is rational.

But there is a knowing which comes from trusting... that's really a better translation than **“believe,”** at least the way we understand that word.

Trust... leads to the deepest knowing. **“Aleah and Bella and Clara” know...** even though they haven't developed the capacity to think. It's a knowing that comes from leaning completely into this mystery. This is what it's like to be Thomas... you leap and find yourselves in God's arms.

Thomas encountered the resurrected Lord. And it's hard not to read this text contemplatively and realize the connections between that encounter and the awareness of the Crucified Lord. Thomas is in the room with those wounds. Visible... but healed. Thomas had asked to put his hand in Jesus' side... to reach into the suffering of Christ... to know that suffering in order to know resurrection. Touch the death... know the life.

And the wounds are there in the room for him to see and to touch. And in that knowing, he encounters the risen Christ.

It's true... In the suffering of the world... in the suffering around you... in your suffering. The risen Christ is there. In all the places where wounds are visible and where we're willing to touch... the Living Lord is there.

It's true at this table and in this act that shows us again the marks of Christ's suffering... and connects us with the resurrected Lord who can heal us... who can take away the doubting of any Thomas, and who is the answer to all our questions.

This is the body of Christ, broken and healed for you.
This is the cup of our salvation, emptied, that you might be filled.
Come... trust... know... and take all of it.

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