

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church
"A Disciple Named Thomas"

By Eric Howell

John 20:19-31

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Last Sunday we stood and proclaimed, "Christ is risen." What a credulous bunch of dreamers some skeptic might have thought we were. Heads in the clouds, tears in our eyes, rousing songs on our lips, together, locked in a room too full, too tight to exit if we wanted...looking back on last Sunday...wasn't Jesus here with us as we gathered!

Like ten disciples trying to explain it, how would you describe the experience of unexpectedly encountering the risen Christ to one who was not there? Remember, ten disciples were gathered on the evening of the day the tomb was found empty. They were huddled in a room together. There were only ten of them. Two were missing, for very different reasons. Judas wasn't there. He had gone off alone and ended his own life in shame and regret for his betrayal of Jesus. Thomas wasn't there either. Thomas is a different story. Whereas Judas never fully accepted who Jesus was and what Jesus was all about, Thomas got it. He still has questions. He has what might be called doubts, but even in that, he gets it. He gets that to follow Jesus, to believe in Him changes everything about life, about death, about life after death. Thomas is a hero for anyone who gets that this Jesus stuff is so important that it better be true because to believe it is to believe something that changes everything.

To call Thomas a hero because he gets it is to reassess him from his usual reputation. In many places, Thomas is only spoken of in whispers. He's a doubter, you know Doubting Thomas. To people who entertain no doubts or questions about their faith, to play host to someone who does so is a threat. So Thomas is a doubter and doubt is a bad thing. He may have come around in the end, but really, who wouldn't with Jesus Himself standing there showing the wounds in his hands and side. What more proof could you possibly need or have? And we don't have such proof, so don't bother asking for it. Thomas was singularly fortunate to have had Jesus seek him out. Jesus' response to him looks like it could have been a benediction to the gospel of John had it ended here in chapter 20. I can see it now: the scene climaxes with Thomas on his knees, "My Lord and my God." And Jesus tenderly looks down on him, "Have you believed because you have seen me?" Then lifting His eyes and His hands in invitation, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." And the stage fades to black, the curtain falls, and the invitation to believe is offered to us who have not seen. What an ending! Thomas' conversion serves to invite all of us and encourage all of us to believe and not doubt. To call Thomas a hero is to reconsider his role in this story vs. calling Thomas simply a doubter who was a reluctant believer at best. He isn't just a doubter, but the one who confesses, "My Lord and my God."

To call Thomas a hero because he gets it is also different from those who appreciate him as the patron saint of those who have doubts. It is somewhat fashionable and understandable to appreciate Thomas' doubt because it seems to give us permission to doubt and see doubt as an important part of faith. It could even be said that to doubt is the substance of true faith as blessed by Jesus who returns to the scene specifically to seek out the one who doubts. So therefore, we might conclude, Thomas represents a truer, harder won faith than the other disciples because he brings a sharp mind and need for some tangible evidence, not just dreamy proclamations. Sometimes Thomas is used to argue for a sort of faith position that doesn't go all in, but maintains a healthy distance from the sort of hard-core faith. Thomas then is seen as the kid who stands against the wall at the school

dance, a little too shy, a little too skeptical, and way too cool to dance with the others who look like fools out there dancing around like that.

But there's no particular virtue in doubt. There is virtue in honesty and integrity. If honesty and integrity mean being honest about the doubts of faith, then there is something good about that. If integrity means that you can be generous and gracious toward yourself and other people who have real deep questions about faith, and not throw them off the faith train as it were; if faith means that it can be in conversation with unanswered questions without being threatened, then in that sense Thomas' witness has been helpful. Remember, the other ten disciples were convinced in their bones and souls that Jesus was resurrected. Thomas wasn't. They didn't shun Thomas because he couldn't get there. They welcomed him in and he stayed with them until, and through his own redemptive experience with Jesus. That's an important early witness about the way church and friendship should be. We are all at different places in our faith.

I used to think that the faith-life of a community was something like a big circle with Jesus in the middle, and we all start on the edge, and the longer we spend in the community heading toward Jesus, the closer to the center we get. The center is the place of faithfulness, deep faith, and spiritual maturity. It is the place of theosis—the place on the journey that is complete transformation into the image of God. My mind has been changed on that a bit. I still think it's a circle and I still think Jesus is at the center of the circle inviting us all to Him, to His cross, and every individual is somewhere in that journey toward (and sometimes away from) Him. But I'm convinced that the journey is less like a direct line to Jesus and more like the journey through a labyrinth. Ever walked one of these? It's like a big circle with a path that you follow from the outside to the inside. At first you think you are headed right for the promised land of the middle of the circle. It feels awfully quick and easy. But then you take a turn, and then another turn. Before you know it, you are back on the edge of the big wide circle.

If you keep walking, you end up back toward the middle. And just when you think you have it figured out the path takes you to unexpected places again. The journey is deceptive in that it appears simple and quick, but in reality it is a long journey of twists and turns. Ever walked one with a bunch of people? Walking it alone is a solitary, moving experience. Walking it with a big group is a communal, moving experience. When you are walking and see 5, 10, 20 other people all on a path, but seemingly randomly moving in different directions along the way, you begin to see that people are all over the map. It's all a journey, but it's not a straight line. Sometimes we are closer to the center. Sometimes we are farther away. That feels like life. Sometimes we are full of Jesus; sometimes it seems like our prayers bounce off the ceiling. Sometimes it seems like you can't wait to get back to church to sing with the saints. Sometimes church is the last place you want to be with all those hypocrites. Usually it's not church that's changed, it's you. You are in a different place. You are facing a different direction. The labyrinth invites us to keep walking one step in front of the other, trusting that the path leads to Jesus. That's faith. It's not always seeing Jesus. That's proof. Proof is what Thomas got after he had faith. Faith is keeping on walking even when you can't see Him. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.

I've seen Thomas called a doubter and lots of other things too. Besides Doubting Thomas, he's been called a lab technician, a skeptic, an empiricist. I think my favorite description of Thomas is that he is Eeyore; you know, from Winnie the Pooh. Like Eeyore, Thomas is late to the party, kind of a buzz kill, a little bit of the sad guy in the otherwise lively bunch. He's the guy with a raincloud over his head. John would have to be Pooh. He calls himself 'the beloved disciple,' and it always seems that he's next to Jesus. I think Matthew would be Owl. He's wise and interesting. In his gospel he quotes the Old Testament a lot, so he knows history and scripture and the Great Story. I can go on. James

is Piglet, John's sidekick and good friend. Andrew is Roo. Of course Peter is Tigger, bouncing in, says what's on his mind, ready for the next adventure, always messing things up. Tigger thinks he can climb a tree. Peter thinks he can walk on water. Tigger's got a good heart, but always frustrating people. Peter was told that he was Satan. So, likewise, Thomas is called a lot of things by people who both revile him and respect him. But I think we've mostly missed the point of Thomas. In noticing something else about him, we can be reminded of, and perhaps reclaim something we all need.

Thomas only shows up three times in the gospels, each time in the gospel of John. Something to keep in mind as you read John: in John's gospel, Jesus is bigger than life. The way John tells it, Jesus is not a simple boy born in a stable. He is "In the beginning the Word was with God and the Word was God and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." In John's gospel, almost everyone else besides Jesus is a little bit dense, ok, they are morons. They are hyper-literalists who take everything Jesus says and asks the most ridiculous questions about it, which is great for us, because their questions give Jesus the chance to explain what He means to them and to us. Take for example, Nicodemus. John 3. Jesus says, "You must be born again," to which the hyper-literalist Nicodemus replies, "What? A grown man is supposed to crawl back in his mother and be born a second time?" Moron. Jesus can explain that He means a spiritual new beginning that is so significant, transformative, and meaningful that it is like a rebirth in your life when you experience it. Or take the disciples in John 11. Jesus says, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him." The disciples, forgetting that the phrase "fallen asleep" was a common euphemism for dying, like passing away, reply, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will get better." Morons. Jesus has to spell it out, "Lazarus has died and for your sake I'm glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

It is the next line in the gospel where we meet Thomas really for the first time. He speaks his first words and when he does we discover that maybe not everyone is a moron after all. Thomas knows, as do all the disciples, that going to Lazarus, just a few miles outside of Jerusalem, is very dangerous for Jesus. The last time he was there they tried to stone him. So the disciples have already tried to talk Jesus out of this. But his mind is set. Thomas turns to the other disciples and says, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Whatever Thomas thought of the wisdom of this journey, he knew the stakes were high for Jesus and for all of them. Embodying the gospels' call to take up your cross, to lay down your life, Thomas is the voice of realism. He's the voice of discipleship. He's the voice of faithfulness. Wherever Jesus leads, let us follow Him, but let us not be misguided about what the life of following Jesus means. It has a cross at the center of it.

The second time we hear from Thomas is in John 14. In his final days Jesus had tried to reassure his followers, "I go to prepare a place for you, and you know the way to the place where I am going." As Richard Hays notes, "Thomas wanted to believe, but this sounded like wispy-cloud talk. At last he blurted out, "Look, we don't even know where You're going! How can we know the way." Somebody had to keep his feet on the ground, right? If Jesus is willing to lead them into Judea, there's no telling where He might take them. Spiritually, they are off the map and into uncharted territory. Following Jesus takes us to places inside ourselves and with our neighbors that we never would have gone otherwise or even dreamed possible. Tradition says that Thomas would eventually go to India and give his life witnessing for Jesus, the only apostle to travel and witness outside the Roman Empire. The church in India still draws its roots all the way back to his witness. There's no telling where Jesus might lead and the way of Jesus means following wherever that is.

The third time we hear from Thomas is after what appeared to be the end of the Jesus dream. Turns out, Thomas was right: where Jesus was leading was to the cross. When the dust settles, Thomas emerges from hiding and finds the other disciples falling all over

themselves to tell him what they experienced. By now the stakes are too high to trifle with what might be post-crucifixion-stress-disorder or therapeutic grief-induced hallucinations that Jesus was alive, had come into their locked room, appeared to them, and commissioned them to continue on. Maybe this was mass hysteria or pious hopefulness, or poetic expressions of how they had decided that the memory of Jesus was so real it was like He was still with them, a metaphor for their continued love of and devotion to the way of a dead messiah-like carpenter from Galilee who for a while at least, changed their lives, but in the end it turned out, couldn't change the violence of the world. Clear-minded, Thomas sees through all of these possibilities in a moment. No, none of those possibilities are good enough. If Jesus is not raised from the dead, then those who say He is are most to be pitied. Unless I thrust my finger into the mark of the nails in His hand and unless I thrust my hand into His side, no way I'll ever believe."

This isn't doubt, but someone who gets it in the way we all need to get it. It is to deeply know that to follow Jesus demands my soul, my life, my all. "Let us go that we may die with Him." It is to get that Jesus is mysterious and beyond our ability to control, or fully pin Him down. "We don't know where You are going. How can we know the way? "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." It is to get that a risen Jesus Christ changes everything. It is to get that this Jesus stuff is not something to be trifled with, a nice little add-on to life's piddling avocations, or just a therapeutic comfort for life's trials. A crucified and risen Christ changes the molecules in the universe into new creation, and transforms each person who is caught up by this humble crucified carpenter. To get this is to fall on our knees with the few who saw the nail marks in his hands and the countless numbers who have not seen and yet believe, "My Lord and my God."