

Eyewitness to Easter: Thomas

I realize Easter is past, however, we've got one more person to look at this morning. He is one of the Twelve, one of those Jesus chose to follow him. We don't hear much from him in the gospels, but he is perhaps most well known by his words and actions after Jesus' resurrection. In fact, it's his comment recorded in the gospel of John that earned him a nickname that's stuck with him for 2,000 years. You've probably guessed by now we are talking about Thomas, often referred to as Doubting Thomas.

I don't think it's fair that you make one statement and then you're stuck with that moniker for the rest of your life. For the rest of history in fact. Of course, you've got people whose actions mark them for the rest of their lives. Benedict Arnold will always be known as a traitor. John Wilkes Booth and Lee Harvey Oswald will always be known as assassins. For you western fans, *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*. He may have been brave once, but Bob Ford will always be the coward and assassin who shot Jesse James in the back. Doubting Thomas may wear this nickname, but the truth is, **Before he was Doubting Thomas, he was Committed Thomas and Brave Thomas.** Let's take a look.

We don't have any detail about Thomas with regard to when and where he was called by Jesus. The Synoptic Gospels only record Thomas as being one of the Twelve disciples. When John mentions Thomas, he usually notes he was called Didymus which means Twin. Thomas was a twin, but we know nothing about his twin. We can assume Thomas likely came from the region of the Galilee like the majority of the other disciples and while we don't have details, simply by the fact he was one of the Twelve, we know he was there with Jesus from the beginning. Somewhere, at some moment Jesus told Thomas to come follow him and Thomas left whatever he was doing, left behind whatever life he had and accepted the invitation and call to follow Jesus. He was committed. Dedicated. Thomas was all in. That means he was there when Jesus healed the sick, made the lame walk and raised the dead. Thomas was there when Jesus fed the 5,000, he was in the boat when Jesus came walking on water and again when Jesus calmed the stormy sea. He was with Jesus as he journeyed to Jerusalem, with him at the triumphal entry, with him at the Last Supper. When Judas left, Thomas stayed. He was with him in the garden at his betrayal. Thomas was there, an eyewitness to it all. You would have to say he was committed, even though like all the other disciples in that final moment in the garden, he ran.

He was Committed Thomas and he was Brave Thomas. In John 11 we read the story of Lazarus. Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha, were friends and followers of Jesus. When Jesus was in Jerusalem or nearby, he enjoyed the hospitality of Lazarus and his sisters, staying in their home and eating at their table. When Lazarus got sick the sisters sent word to Jesus, **“Lord, the one you love is sick.”** **John 11:3** John tells us that **“Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days.”** **John 11:5-6** Jesus was three or four days away when he heard the news about Lazarus and his illness, but he stayed where he was two more days. There was a reason behind it all. Jesus said all of this, including the death of Lazarus, would result in God receiving glory and in Jesus being glorified as well. All of this was part of God’s timing and plan, but Lazarus, Martha, Mary nor the disciples understood that at that moment. The delay just didn’t make sense.

You might as well know, we won’t always understand God’s timing, his plan or the way he works. The bible says His ways are above our ways, his thoughts above our thoughts. Life won’t always be fair, but God will always be faithful. After two days of delay, Jesus says to the disciples, **“Let us go back to Judea.”** and they respond, **“But rabbi, a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you and yet you are going back there?”** **John 11:7-8** The disciples raise their concern that the trip back to Jerusalem at this time might be too dangerous. Jesus uses a euphemism for death when he tells them Lazarus has fallen asleep but “I’m going to go wake him up.” “Lord, if he sleeps he will get better.” Jesus then plainly said to them, **“Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I’m glad I was not there so you may believe. But let us go to him.”** **John 11:14-15** It’s at this point we hear from Thomas. **“Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with him.’”** **John 11:16**

Okay, he’s no Mr. Sunshine. Not exactly “God’s man of faith and power”. He wasn’t optimistic, but he wasn’t a coward. “Let’s go back so he won’t have to die alone.” I always thought Thomas was kind of an Eeyore kind of guy, that “let’s all go die with him” personality but it may say something more than that. Thomas was brave in what he said and Thomas is a realist. He looks at the circumstances and counts the cost. Peter just wades in without thinking about consequences, but Thomas is more deliberate. Peter is led by his emotions, Thomas is led by reason and thought. “Let’s examine the situation, look at possible outcomes, weigh the cost.”

“Let us also go with Jesus that we may die with him.” The great spiritual truth was no one could die with Jesus because He alone could die for the sins of the world. Only his death

could bring forgiveness of sins. However, perhaps Thomas did understand the call that Jesus gives to all of his disciples, to all that would follow him. Jesus said, **“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.”** Luke 9:23-24 Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, **“When Jesus calls a man, he bids him come and die.”**

...Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Three years earlier Thomas had accepted that call from Jesus. “Come follow me.” When Thomas said “Let’s go so we can die with him” perhaps he wasn’t being pessimistic after all. Perhaps Thomas was simply saying what he had understood three years earlier, that Jesus’ call was a call to surrender, a call to discipleship, a call that to answer it meant taking up his own cross and following Jesus. “Let us go die with Jesus” could be a life verse for all of us. Let’s go die to ourselves and our own choices and let’s find our life in living for Jesus. Paul said, **“I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.”** Galatians 2:20. This is the life to which he has called all of us. Which is why if we only think of Thomas as “Doubting Thomas” then we haven’t seen the whole picture. Before any doubts there was this obedient, committed, brave, sold out follower of Jesus. “Let’s go die with him!”

We hear Thomas again in John’s gospel. It was the night of the Last Supper. Jesus has washed the feet of the disciples and has told them that one of them will betray him. He then tells them he will only be with them for a little while longer. They are obviously confused and troubled and Jesus says to them, **“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.”** John 14:1-4

It’s Thomas that responds to that statement. **“Thomas said to him, ‘Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?’”** John 14:5 Here we see again Thomas the thinker, the analyzer, the realist. He’s already said he is willing to go with Jesus, to die with him, but he needs to know where to go. It’s a sincere, logical question Thomas is asking. It’s the question men and women have been asking from the beginning. “What is the way? Where is the way to life, to peace, to salvation, to eternal life, to God? How do I find it?”

Where do I go?” Thomas is trying to analyze it and figure it out like so many have done through the centuries. Don’t overanalyze it. Listen as Jesus answers, **“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” John 14:6** If you are trying to find the way, look to Jesus. Daniel Darling writes, **“There is not a path or a principle. There is only a person. Jesus is the way. Jesus is the truth. Jesus is the life. He didn’t merely point to the truth. He didn’t merely show them the way. He didn’t merely tell them how to improve their lives. He’s the end of the journey, the object of our obsessions, what our hearts truly long for.” ...Daniel Darling** A good question from Thomas.

So now we come to that infamous moment after the crucifixion. John tells us, **“On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.” John 20:19-20**

For some reason Thomas wasn’t there. Maybe he just needed to think this all through. Maybe he just stepped out for a breath of air. We don’t know why, we just have John’s word. **“Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord!’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.’” John 20:24-25**

Thomas, the rational thinker was having to come to grips with something that was totally irrational. Crucified people don’t rise from the dead. More than that, Thomas is having to think through all that he had been thinking and deciding over the past three years. This logical thinker had come to the conclusion that Jesus was the Messiah and was going to establish God’s new rule in Israel and now Jesus is dead. “Don’t try to cheer me up. Don’t try to convince me of something that cannot be. Jesus is dead. He wasn’t the Messiah. We made a mistake and we’ve got to move on. So here’s the deal, unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my hand into that hole in his side, I’m not buying any of this.”

Thomas was honest about his doubts, his questions, his skepticism. It’s okay to doubt. It’s okay to question. When you don’t know, when you have doubts: ask, seek, knock. That’s what Jesus said to do. And notice we have a responsibility to stay close to those who are questioning and looking for answers. I don’t know what went on during the next few days, but

the other disciples didn't banish him. They drew him closer. "It's ok Thomas. Stay with us." They knew sooner or later Jesus would show up again. They knew Jesus would meet Thomas in his doubts. Jesus knew Thomas. He had called him. He knew he had to process things. There was no way Jesus wasn't going to show up for Thomas. It made me think of the song we sang, Reckless Love. "Oh the overwhelming, never ending reckless love of God. It chases me down, fights till I'm found, leaves the 99... There's no shadow you won't light up, mountain you won't climb up, coming after me." Thomas would experience that reckless love. There was no way Jesus wouldn't show up for Thomas and there is no way he won't show up for you!

"A week later his disciples were in the house again and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.' Thomas said to him, 'My Lord and my God!'" John 20:26-28

I love the fact Jesus didn't berate him, didn't humiliate him. "Yo, Doubting Thomas. What's the matter with you?" Jesus loves honest seekers of the truth. Those who are honest with themselves. Jesus comes to reveal himself to Thomas so Thomas can honestly settle things in his heart. Ruth Haley Barton wrote, **"In this encounter, Jesus respects Thomas' doubt by giving him the proof he needed and Thomas learned a very valuable lesson: he learned to doubt his doubts. He discovered that even though his doubts and disillusionment felt very real to him, they were also not an accurate representation of reality. Thank God for Thomas whose interaction with Jesus challenges us all to be honest about our doubts and disillusionment and in that way invite Jesus in, while at the same time allowing Jesus to prove those doubts wrong."...Ruth Haley Barton**

I love Thomas' response. He didn't need to do any of the things he had said. No touching the nail prints in Jesus' hands, simply seeing and hearing Jesus settled things for Thomas and he responds, "My Lord and my God!" Thomas is affirming and confessing that Jesus is more than Messiah, he is both Lord and God. Savior and Divine. A revelation of the risen Lord makes a difference and challenges us to make a decision. You can't believe Jesus died on the cross and now is risen from the dead and not make a decision about who he really is! If it's true, then the only response is the one Thomas made, "My Lord and My God!"

Committed Thomas, Brave Thomas, Doubting Thomas. And Jesus responds to the doubts and the questions. Questions aren't sinful or bad. In fact, because of Thomas' question we have Jesus great affirmation, "I am the way, the truth and the life." And because of Thomas' doubts, we have his confession that Jesus is both Lord and God.

After his confession, Jesus said to Thomas, **"Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."** John 20:29

In spite of doubts, questions, in spite of locked doors and fear, Jesus came and stood among the disciples, stood before Thomas and provided the means for a response. I think Jesus is standing before some of you today. You may have locked the doors, tried to keep him out, allowed doubts and questions to blind your ability to see, but today, in this moment, the overwhelming, never ending reckless love of God is knocking at the door of your heart. Jesus said "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me." Revelation 3:20 There is an invitation to fellowship, to relationship, to salvation, to life with Jesus., the risen Lord. As Jesus said to Thomas, he says to you by His Holy Spirit, "Stop doubting and believe!" If Jesus is not the Savior and Lord of your life, if you've not surrendered your heart and life to him, there is no better time than right now. Don't wait!