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Gospel of John #45
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Sermon Summary #45

“Doubting” Thomas or “Devoted” Thomas? John 20:24-31

Aside from Judas Iscariot, who betrayed our Lord into the hands of his enemies and later committed suicide, the apostle who has had to endure the greatest assault on his character is Thomas. What do we know about this man, and why should we care? Do his life and experience and relation to Jesus have anything of practical value for us today? The answer, I assure you, is Yes!

Who was Thomas?

We don't know a great deal about Thomas. Were it not for this episode in John 20, most Christians wouldn't even know that there was an apostle by that name. We know that Thomas had a twin brother. The name “Thomas” is a transliteration of the Hebrew word for “twin.” And “Didymus” (John 20:24) was the Greek word for “twin.”

Thomas is mentioned twice earlier in John's gospel. When Jesus announced to his disciples that he wished to travel to Judea, we read in John 11:16 that “Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with him.’” And in John 14:5, Thomas expressed confusion over something Jesus said about his impending death.

Tradition tells us that Thomas eventually took the gospel to India where he was killed by a spear from the hand of a king who opposed the Christian faith. But we can't be certain this actually happened.

So, why is Thomas known to history as “Doubting Thomas”? The reason is that Thomas, like some of you, I suspect, had his doubts about the truth of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. A couple of months ago we were forced to celebrate Easter separated from each other because of Covid-19. But even then, Easter is typically the most joyful celebration of the year, even more so than Christmas. But I suspect that some of you struggled because you secretly wonder, indeed, you doubt whether or not Jesus was literally and physically raised from the dead. You may still be in doubt today.

Is Doubt always a Sin?

Doubt or uncertainty isn't always bad. It can often be productive, by driving us into deeper study and investigation. If we are absolutely convinced about everything, beyond the shadow of a doubt, we face the even bigger problem of arrogance and pride. Doubt humbles us. It reminds us that we are finite and that our knowledge is always subject to improvement and increase.

But doubt can also be crippling in a way that undermines our relationship with God. If we are constantly doubting his word or wondering if he will fulfill his promises or are cynical of his stated intentions, it's hard to grow spiritually.

I've known many who are tormented by fears that God can't be as good as he portrays himself in Scripture. Or they are paralyzed by uncertainty concerning the forgiveness of their sins. Some experience a gnawing anxiety about whether Jesus was really God and whether he can be trusted with their lives. This sort of incessant second-guessing of God's revealed purposes is ultimately counter-productive to a healthy relationship with him and others.

This is why Paul's statement in Colossians 2:2 is so important for us. There he says that one of his goals in praying for the Colossians was that they might “reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding.”

“Full assurance” is a very real possibility for us. That doesn't mean we will never again scratch our heads in bewilderment or wonder if a biblical statement can really mean what it seems to mean. But it does mean there is a degree of certainty concerning the most basic and foundational truths in Scripture that is attainable in this life. Our

knowledge will never be infallible or exhaustive, but it can be sufficiently accurate and adequate to sustain our hope and energize our hearts to persevere in what God has called us to do.

I don't think it's possible, at least not this side of heaven, for us to banish every wayward thought that might run counter to what God says in his Word. Until Christ comes, Satan will continue to sow the seeds of doubt in our minds. Adverse circumstances, what appears to be unanswered prayer, an affliction that isn't healed, a friend who abandons us in a moment of profound crisis, among other things, all have the potential to undermine, in varying degrees, our confidence in who God is. But that doesn't mean we can't experience what Paul refers to as "full assurance" (Col. 2:2).

On Easter Sunday Night

So, let's go back to John 20 and find out precisely what happened.

It was Sunday night, the first Easter, the evening of the day on which Jesus had risen from the dead. The disciples were scared to death. They were probably saying to themselves, "If the Jewish authorities could torture and murder Jesus, our leader, what prevents them from doing the same thing to us?" So, they were hold up, hiding, securely shut in behind closed doors, or so they thought. We read this John 20:19 –

"On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you'" (John 20:19).

After he showed them his hands and his side, they "were glad when they saw the Lord" (John 20:20).

Only the reality of the resurrection can account for this transformation in their lives. Just think for a moment of the massive shift in their minds and hearts. These were people who trembled in fear and cowardice. No sooner had Jesus been arrested than they ran for cover into the night. But very soon they will be out in the streets proclaiming Jesus as Lord. Fearful, timid, cowardly people do not suddenly become joyful, bold, and powerful unless something undeniable and dramatic has occurred. The fact that these men and women and countless others were immediately willing to die for the gospel can only be explained by their firm belief that Jesus was truly alive.

One often hears the skeptic protest: "Wait a minute, Sam. How do we know they didn't make it all up? They could have conspired to create a narrative in which Jesus rose from the dead even though they knew he didn't."

But what did they have to gain by lying? Fame? Power? Money? Prestige? Hardly! Rather, they faced mockery and rejection and hatred and disdain and the loss of wealth. By concocting a lie, they would only have guaranteed torture, arrest, imprisonment, and eventual execution. Sane people don't willingly endure such mistreatment and death for something they know to be a lie.

The only way to explain this remarkable turnaround was that they had seen Jesus alive and were forever transformed.

But wait. Something's missing. Actually, not "something" but "someone." Thomas wasn't there. Look again at v. 24 –

"Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came" (John 20:24).

Where in the world was he? Some say he was a pessimist. He saw the death of Jesus as the end of everything he'd hoped for, so there was no point in going on. There was no point in meeting with the others if all there was to do was cry and feel sorry for one another. Perhaps. We can't know for sure.

But is it fair to call him "Doubting Thomas"? Some say No. If he had been present when the risen Christ first appeared to the disciples, he too would have believed and would have experienced the same "peace" that Jesus imparted to them (v. 19). But being absent, he is understandably filled with uncertainty and anxiety. If some other than Thomas had also been absent when Jesus showed up, might they have responded the same way Thomas did?

Others say, Yes, he is deserving of the title, "Doubting Thomas." Notwithstanding the combined eyewitness testimony of the other disciples, men whom he loved and trusted, and who he knew loved him, he would not believe.

His doubt seems even more culpable when we recall that he had seen Lazarus raised from the dead only a few weeks earlier! If he doubted that Jesus had been raised, it can't have been because he didn't believe that God can raise the dead. In fact, I suspect that the other disciples probably reminded him of it: "Tommy, why do you question if Jesus was raised? Don't you remember when he himself raised Lazarus from the dead? Why should it be so difficult for you to believe that God could raise Jesus too?"

Try to envision the joy and zeal of the other disciples in sharing with Thomas what had happened. You may recall that Jesus appeared to two of his followers on the road to Emmaus. They in turn reported to the apostles their experience. Yet, despite their confident repetition of the story Thomas would not believe. He demands tangible evidence based on his knowledge of how Jesus died.

I can well imagine how energetic Mary Magdalene would have been as she told Thomas of her face-to-face encounter with Jesus and how she heard him speak her name. Peter and John would undoubtedly have explained to him their experience when they went to the tomb on Easter Sunday morning. "C'mon, Tommy! We saw him. We talked to him. We ate dinner with him. He is as real and physical and touchable as you and I are."

In fact, I strongly suspect that all the disciples spent hours with Thomas in the days that followed, telling them of how they saw Jesus and heard him speak and ate dinner with him. I'm quite sure that Thomas grew weary of hearing their arguments, just as they grew increasingly frustrated with his stubborn refusal to believe.

Thank goodness, the story doesn't end there. We read in v. 26 that "eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and *Thomas was with them*. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'"

The Jews counted days inclusively. Therefore, 8 days later would mean they were gathered together the following Sunday. I wish I knew what they did and what they discussed during that week between the two appearances of Jesus. I wonder if Thomas was himself a bit morose and withdrawn, moody and anxious. Were they celebrating while he moped?

Once again, the doors were closed and locked. Their fear had not totally subsided. They were probably still concerned that the religious or civil leaders might come and do to them what they had done to Jesus.

Now, remember that back a week earlier Thomas had demanded empirical evidence that Jesus had been raised. "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe" (John 20:25). What Jesus then says in v. 27 proves that he hears us even though he is not physically present.

Did Thomas actually put his finger into the hands and the side of Jesus? We don't know. Perhaps he was too overcome with awe and reverence that he no longer thought it necessary. He was convinced!

What I want you to see is how kind, merciful, and patient Jesus is toward the dull, doubting, slow-willed believer. He doesn't rebuke Thomas. He doesn't reject him or kick him out of the apostolic group. He loves him! His displays remarkable longsuffering. We might have expected Jesus to say something like: "Well, Thomas, your doubting can't go unpunished. From now on you are the least of the apostles, you hard-headed, bone-headed, knucklehead!" But, no!

Thomas's Declaration of Faith

As I said, we don't know if Thomas did what Jesus commanded or if he simply shouted out loud: "My Lord, and my God!" (John 20:28). This wasn't the sort of profanity that we so often hear when people shout aloud: "Good Lord" or "Oh, my God!" That sort of statement was unheard of in the first century. We must be careful not to take 21st century slang and profanity and read it back into the Bible.

In this case Thomas's confession isn't proclaimed into the air but is directly addressed to Jesus. Notice that "Thomas answered *him*" (v. 28a). And Jesus in turn acknowledges Thomas's faith in v. 29a.

This, then, is a personal confession of faith, one which all of us individually must make. It is the language of love:

“**MY Lord, MY God!**” It is the language of amazement and adoration and delight. It is the language of repentance and faith. It wasn’t enough for Thomas merely to have declared, “He is Lord and He is God,” or even, “You are Lord and You are God.” Thomas is laying hold of Christ personally, declaring you are “My Lord and My God.”

Note carefully how Jesus did *not* respond. Note what he *didn’t* do. He didn’t say, “Shhh! Cut that out. Get up off your knees. After all, I’m just a man like the rest of you. Don’t you realize it is blasphemous to worship anyone other than God. For heaven’s sake, Thomas, you almost sound like one of those conservative, evangelical Christians at Bridgeway in 2020!”

I want to remind you of other instances in the NT where a man tried to worship another man. In Acts 10, when the Gentile Cornelius finally met Peter, it says that he “fell down at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter lifted him up, saying, ‘Stand up; I too am a man’ (Acts 10:25-26). After Paul healed a paralytic in Acts 14, the people in Lystra began to worship both him and Barnabas, declaring that they were gods. Listen to Paul’s response:

“Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them” (Acts 14:15).

Of course, I’m not suggesting that Jesus is denying being a man. He is truly human. But unlike all others he is also truly God and thus deserving of the worship not only of Thomas but of all.

The Faith of those who don’t see Jesus

What Thomas does triggers in Jesus’ mind the coming to faith of those who won’t see him in the flesh, as Thomas did. In fact, when Jesus spoke here in v. 29, he was talking about you and me and all who have believed in him even though we haven’t seen him in the flesh.

Let’s back up for just a moment and look at what Jesus is asking Thomas to do when he tells him to stop doubting and to believe. On one level, Jesus is saying to Thomas,

“The evidence is clear and undeniable. Everything the others have been telling you is true. I did die. I did rise from the dead. I am alive. I am not a ghost. You are not experiencing some sort of hallucination or spiritual dream. This body that you see is the same body that was nailed to the cross, although now it is glorified and eternal. You can touch me with your own hands and prove it to yourself. So, stop doubting and believe. The resurrection is true!”

But what about us today? We can’t see Jesus with our physical eyes. We can’t touch him as Thomas and the others could. We are nearly 2,000 years removed from his physical presence on earth. Can we believe with the same quality of faith, the same intensity and joy and confidence of faith that Thomas and the other disciples experienced? Yes!

When Jesus declares those “blessed” who have “not seen” him and “yet have believed” (v. 29) he means happy and favored and accepted by God. He doesn’t mean they are more blessed, as if to suggest that faith without seeing is better or superior to faith that is based on seeing. Remember that all the apostles had a faith that was largely based on their having seen the Savior with their eyes.

Jesus obviously foresees a time when he will not be physically present and thus unable to provide such visible and tangible proof that he is truly alive. All who believe after his ascension into heaven will have to do so without the benefit of seeing Jesus in the flesh. But that in no way means their faith is inferior or that their joy is any less intense.

Consider how Peter said it in 1 Peter 1:8,

“Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory.”

His point is that unlike me, says Peter, you never had the privilege of seeing Jesus. And you don’t see him now, either. Yet this is no barrier to your love for him and your ability to find deep and life-changing delight and joy in him.

But why such a huge emphasis on believing? Why is faith so important? Belief or faith is what connects us to Christ. It is what unites us to him. It is what brings us into the personal experience of the forgiveness that he secured by his death and resurrection.

Consider my wedding ring. Most men today have solid rings with few or no jewels. But when Ann purchased my ring 48 years ago she got one with nine very small diamonds. If you look at it closely you will see that each diamond is held securely in place by two tongs. The tongs don't make the diamonds beautiful. They don't increase the value of the ring. They are simply the means by which I am able to receive and retain the diamonds for myself.

Faith is like that. Faith receives. Faith embraces. Faith or belief holds fast to the diamond of God's gift to us of his Son.

So what, precisely, is faith or belief, and why does Jesus pronounce as blessed those who experience it? On the one hand, faith is believing with your mind certain truths about Jesus: that he is the incarnate second person of the Trinity; that he died as our substitute on the cross; that he endured judgment in our place; that he did truly and physically rise from the dead.

But faith or belief is far more. It is not merely receiving Jesus, but *relishing* him. It is not merely seeing that he is who he claimed to be; it is *savoring* him. It is not merely an idea in the mind; it is an experience of the *heart*. It is not merely affirming truths about him; it is trusting him to set you free from guilt and condemnation.

Faith or belief is the whole soul, by which I mean your mind, spirit, affections, and will, saying:

“Jesus, you are my only hope. I believe you are precisely who you claimed to be. I believe you have accomplished precisely what the Bible says you have. I believe that when you declared from the cross, ‘I am finished,’ you meant it. I put my confidence in you to reconcile me to God. I put my trust in you and your death on the cross and your resurrection from the dead to secure my forgiveness and bring me eternal life. I trust in you alone to satisfy my soul and to fulfill my deepest longings and to impart to me the peace and joy and freedom that my heart so desperately longs to enjoy.”

Truly to believe in Jesus and experience being “blessed” as he intended it here in John 20:29, you don't have to move a muscle, blink an eye, raise a hand, sign a card, or walk an aisle. Just believe. Just trust.

Conclusion

I don't think we do him justice when we refer to Thomas as “Doubting Thomas.” I think we should call him “Devoted Thomas”! He is wholly devoted to his Lord and God? Are you?

The twentieth chapter of John comes to an end with this simple declaration of what the entire Gospel of John is about. Here we are told why John wrote this narrative of the life, ministry, miracles, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It was so that “you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God,” in the same way that Thomas did, “and that by believing,” just as Thomas did, “you may have life in his name” (John 20:30-31).