

Thomas the Doubter and Believer

April 16, 2023

“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.”

The Second Sunday of Easter is always called Doubting Thomas Sunday. In John’s Gospel we heard how Jesus, who had been crucified the week before, was now risen from the dead and appeared to his disciples. One of the disciples was a man named Thomas, who is singled out as the one disciple who wasn’t around the week before when Jesus showed up the first time, and who did not immediately accept that Jesus was who he said he was.

Who was Thomas? There is actually very little that we know about him. We know that he was a Jew from Galilee, possibly a carpenter, who was one of Jesus’s early followers, and who became the patron saint of architects and builders. The name Thomas is not actually a given name, but it is the Aramaic word that means “twin.” So whose twin brother was he? We don’t know, but there have been some claims that he might have been Jesus’s twin brother.

There are several apocryphal works that have been attributed to Thomas, including the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Acts of Thomas*. Thomas is known to have become a missionary who traveled to India, where he established several religious communities and was martyred there in 72 AD. The Mar Thoma Christians in India claim that their church was founded by St. Thomas and he is their patron saint. There are several other traditions that Thomas led missions as far away as China, Indonesia, and even Paraguay. There are numerous relics which are attributed to Thomas throughout India, the Middle East, and the eastern Mediterranean.

The *Gospel of Thomas* was one of several scriptures that were discovered in 1945 in Nag Hammadi, in Egypt. It is very different from the other Gospels that we know. It doesn't give a narrative account about Jesus, but lists sayings of Jesus as well as some of his parables. The early Christian church deemed these writings to be heretical, and it is speculated that the manuscript was buried in order to hide it from the authorities; it is now part of the Coptic Museum in Cairo.

The *Acts of Thomas* is a completely separate work, probably written by an anonymous author a couple hundred years after his death. The *Acts of Thomas* tells about his missionary journeys to India and his martyrdom there. Like the *Gospel of Thomas*, it was considered to be heretical by the Roman Catholic church.

The Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke simply name Thomas as "one of the twelve," but it is because of John's Gospel that we have come to know him as "Doubting Thomas." John's Gospel is the only place in the Bible that Thomas is portrayed as a skeptic. Greek text doesn't use the word "doubt." The Greek word that is used is "pistós" which means "believer" or "faithful." Jesus says to him: μή γίνου άπιστοζ αλλά πιστόζ. Do not become faithless but faithful. The scene was immortalized in the famous painting of the Italian renaissance master Caravaggio titled *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*. Incredulity, unbelief, faithlessness, doubt.

But this story troubles me. Jesus knew that Thomas had always been faithful and a trustworthy disciple. We saw this earlier in Chapter 11 of John's Gospel that Lazarus was the only one of the disciples to encourage Jesus to go to Lazarus after he had fallen ill and his sisters sent for Jesus. The other disciples warned Jesus not to go out of fear for his safety.

The Bible is full of people asking to see a “sign” from God, something to let them know who he is. Last week we heard that Mary Magdalene mistook Jesus for a gardener, but she isn’t called “doubting Mary.” Why should this one faithful disciple be characterized as “doubting?” I think that Thomas has gotten a bad rap all these years.

The scholar Elaine Pagels, in her book *Beyond Belief*, writes that John and Thomas were both followers of Jesus, and each of them—or their own followers—wrote about Jesus, but that they had very different perspectives—and very strong opinions—on who Jesus was. In fact, Pagels speculates that there may have been some actual animosity between the two, and that John wrote his Gospel in order to refute Thomas’s teachings!!! John attributes Jesus with saying, “Blessed are those who have **not** seen and yet have come to believe.” That may have why John wanted to cast Thomas in a bad light, scoffing at him that he had to have empirical proof in order to believe in Jesus.

The early church fathers decided that John’s story of Jesus was a better one than Thomas’s. John’s version made it into the New Testament, while the Thomas’s version was condemned. Because of this, many Christians have come to believe that doubt is synonymous with having a lack of faith. As much as I love and revere John’s Gospel, I don’t agree with this. I don’t believe that doubt is a bad thing. Being a skeptic is not necessarily a bad thing.

Thomas asked for proof, and we also want proof. We want to know that our faith is not misguided. Doubt that is not dismissive but reverent and seeking can be a wonderful tool, one that guides us to a deeper learning, soul searching, and spiritual revelation. Faith that is based on absolute certainty can lead to fanaticism. Faith that is tempered with doubt can be mature and stable.

Many holy people have struggled with their own questions of faith, and with their doubts. According to the theologian Paul Tillich, doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith. We shouldn't suppress our doubts; we should explore them. We should explore our thoughts in order to deepen our beliefs and convictions.

Mother Teresa was a saintly person who is well known to have struggled with her own doubts. The Jewish-American author Isaac Bashevis Singer stated that doubt is part of all religion, that all the religious thinkers were doubters.

As soon as Jesus displayed his wounds and asked Thomas to touch them, Thomas declared, "My lord and my God!" Jesus engaged Thomas's senses: Thomas heard Jesus's voice, saw Jesus's face, and touched his wounded body. And, it was through that sensory experience that Thomas was the first person to speak the truth that was revealed on the Cross: that Jesus as his lord and his God.

I don't see Thomas as a doubter, at least not in a negative way. He was a concrete thinker. Was this person standing in front of him a ghost or some other supernatural being? Thomas required physical proof to know that the person was in fact his dear friend and mentor who had been arrested, cruelly tortured and shamefully executed only a week before. All the disciples were freaked out by the recent events and were hiding out in case they should become targets too.

Resurrection wasn't a commonplace occurrence, to say the least. Thomas had seen Lazarus resurrected, but how could he know that Jesus had also been resurrected? As a concrete thinker, once he heard and saw the physical evidence that Jesus was real, he believed him. His faith was strengthened by his doubts.

Faith is not a static state. Faith is a daily, ongoing exercise. The faith journey is filled with doubts. Most of you know that I grew up in an environment of doubt, in

a family and community of agnostics. My faith journey began in doubt, and has gradually worked its way to faith. We all struggle with our fears. Faith doesn't and shouldn't take away our doubts. Doubts that are explored can strengthen our faith. Maybe doubt is even necessary in order for faith to be realized.

We should not be afraid of our doubts and fears. We should welcome them as a gift from God, who has given us our intellect and our emotions. We should be grateful for this story about Thomas, who was known as a doubter, but who became one of the greatest apostles. May he teach us to have the courage and determination to always question and seek truth, and to never lose faith in the love of our Lord.

This Easter season, let us all in our own ways confront and welcome our doubts and fears, and use them to strengthen our faith in God, in Christ, and in the Resurrection.

Amen.