

“Believing Thomas”

Introduction: In this Easter season we are looking at some of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus and considering and taking encouragement from the ways the risen Jesus came alongside his followers and met them in their grief, their hopelessness and broken dreams, their fear and anxiety, and (as we’ll see today) their doubt. Jesus met them as they struggled with these familiar emotions and enabled them to keep moving forward in life. It’s a reminder that we are loved by the God who does not abandon us when times get tough but meet us and walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death, and leads us out the other side (Ps. 23).

Thomas is one whom the risen Jesus met. No doubt you have heard the name “Doubting Thomas?” His wrestling with the resurrection of Jesus has made him one of the more famous, or perhaps we should say, infamous, individuals in the biblical record. But as we review his experience today, I hope that we will see his doubt not as a bad thing, but even as a helpful thing. Doubt, actually, is an important aspect of our faith. Wrestling with our doubts is one of the key ways our faith becomes strengthened so that we can remain firmly anchored through the many storms we will face in life.

Given that we’re hearing a lot in these pandemic-filled days about the importance of antibodies in recognizing and fighting off a virus, Tim Keller, writing a dozen years ago in his book, *The Reason for God*, illustrates the place of doubt in very poignant terms:

A faith without some doubts is like a human body without any antibodies in it. People who blithely go through life too busy or too indifferent to ask hard questions about why they believe as they do will find themselves defenseless against either the experience of tragedy or the probing questions of a smart skeptic ... (p. xvi).

If you have doubts as you come to worship today, welcome to the human race! But, as well, be grateful for what God may want to teach you as you wrestle with them. Let’s review Thomas’ story [READ].

I. Unless I see...

A. As the story unfolds, recall that last week we saw, on the evening of the day of resurrection, Jesus appear to his disciples who were hiding in a locked room out of fear. As we reflected, we suggested that the fear came from a variety of different sources. They were afraid that the religious and civil authorities might now come after them, they were afraid of what friends and neighbors might say to them about what seemed like a failed object of their faith, and they were afraid of how Jesus might respond to them, given that they had all deserted him. But then we saw Jesus graciously make his way not only through the locked doors of their room but also of through the locked doors of their hearts, meeting them in their fear by speaking to them a word of peace—harmony and well-being; God’s word of reconciliation, healing, forgiveness, enabled by the cross—and then call them to extend that peace to others. It had to have been an incredibly unexpected and uplifting experience!

As I thought some more this past week about what went on in that locked room, I came across a line in a prayer from the Canons of Dort (an early-17<sup>th</sup> c. confessional document of the church in the Netherlands...I’m sure you’ve read them recently!): “Resurrected Lord, your crafty Holy Spirit gets into the deepest places of human lives, loosing locked-down hearts and softening crusty ones.”

B. Well, there certainly had been a loosening of hearts in that locked room! But, there was one whose heart still remained in a locked-down mode, and that was Thomas. In fact, if you missed all that we've been talking about so far, know that Thomas did as well! For some reason, Thomas had not been with his fellow disciples in that locked room when Jesus showed up. We're not told why. Perhaps Thomas was simply one of those kinds of people who needed to grieve alone. His friends certainly respected that, but they also couldn't wait to share their newfound joy! So they tracked him down and told him that they had seen the Lord, they had seen Jesus. But Thomas did not share their joy. Sometimes known as the Eeyore of the disciples, Thomas instead said, "unless I see him, in fact, unless I see and touch all those marks of his crucifixion, I will not believe." Now, I don't doubt that Thomas believed his fellow disciples had seen something. He just wanted to make sure that the Jesus he had come to know and the fellow who had just risen were the same person. Actually, dubbing him "Doubting Thomas" for this desire isn't very fair. In point of fact, Thomas just wanted the same evidence that his friends had been given when Jesus had shown them his hands and his side (20:20). They, too, had struggled with resurrection when told of it by the women who had gone to the tomb. As Luke reports it, the words of the women had seemed like nonsense to them (cf. Lk. 24:9-12).

C. I think it's safe to say that we like Thomas, don't we? We like him because he's a straight-up, practical guy, the guy who's not afraid to ask the hard questions. When Thomas appears a few chapters earlier, the disciples are being informed by Jesus about his impending death and ascension into heaven, that he would soon be taken from them but then he would come back and take them with him, and that they of course knew the way to the place where he was going. As writer Jamie Clark-Soles describes the scene (*Reading John for Dear Life*, 144), listening to the words of Jesus here is a little like being a part of those conversations when someone is talking on a level entirely above you and everyone listening is nodding their heads and acting like they know and understand what is being said when really, no one has a clue! But not Thomas. Instead of nodding his head, Thomas speaks up and says to Jesus, "Well, actually, I have no idea what you're talking about!" (Jn. 14:1-5). We all need those brave people in our classrooms, our office meetings, and our lives. We may very well need to be that person.

D. Jesus graciously responds to Thomas at that point, and then we see him do so again in our text. This time Thomas is now with his colleagues, who are back in that same locked room. Jesus not only finds Thomas but makes his way inside once again. He is persistent, this "hound of heaven," as Jesus is sometimes known. He again begins by pronouncing "peace," probably something he knows his followers would need to be reminded of weekly, as our fear has a way of bubbling back up, as the locked doors (again) reveal. Then, he invites Thomas to see and to touch the wounds of his crucifixion. I picture it as a very tender moment, not one where Jesus is yelling at Thomas but simply, and graciously, meeting Thomas where he was and inviting him to discover what he needed to discover. As far as we can tell, Thomas never got as far as touching Jesus. Seeing was enough. The glorious presence of the risen Lord probably caused Thomas to forget all about his conditions and he was moved to blurt out: "My Lord and my God!" With the guidance and patience of Jesus, Thomas had worked through what he needed to work through. It was time to discard his doubt and bow down.

## II. Blessed are those who have not seen...

A. Well might we say, "Yes, but." Yes, but Thomas, as he wrestled with his doubts, had the privilege of having Jesus right there with him. We do not. Probably anticipating this objection, this is where Jesus takes the conversation. He says to Thomas: "Because you have seen me, you have believed;

blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” To be sure, Thomas’ faith, as well as the faith of those to whom Jesus appeared, is privileged. But notice that we’re not bereft by not seeing like Thomas saw; Jesus says we’re actually blessed. How can that be?

B. Hear, again, what John writes:

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name (vv. 30-31).

John doesn’t write to add to the annals of history, or to add another tome to a shelf in a theological library. John writes to persuade his readers about the identity of Jesus, and in the process, to enable an encounter between us and the risen Christ, to see Jesus through what John has written. We’re blessed because we now have a whole catalogue of signs, a whole collection of acts that John has put together so that we can have what we need to help us wrestle through our doubts and give us reasonable ground for belief, as well as the strengthening of our faith. And John does this so that we can experience, as we believe, and as our belief is strengthened, real life, abundant life, the life that is truly life.

C. In many ways, Thomas and his friends are now passing their experience on to us. What will we do with it? Where do you need Jesus to come alongside you and help you wrestle with your doubts? Where do you need Jesus to strengthen the ground of your faith? Where might he be calling you to trust that he has everything in his control, that crucifixion does have not the last word? Where might Jesus be calling you to doubt your doubts, to know when it’s time to bow down in awestruck wonder and simply but profoundly, along with, now, believing Thomas, proclaim, “My Lord and my God!”?

This week, consider taking John up on his offer to reveal real life to you. Bring your doubts to the gospel of John and read, at one sitting if possible (it will take about the same time as a Netflix movie). See if risen Christ, through his crafty Holy Spirit, just might come alongside you and begin a helpful conversation as you wrestle together with your doubts...