

Nathan Willard
Sermon for April 3, 2005
Thomas Sunday

The Blessing of Thomas

John 14: 5 “Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?”

John 14:8 “Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father and we shall be satisfied.”

John 20: 24 “Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe.” Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. The doors were shut, but Jesus came and stood among them, and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.”

Thomas has been ill remembered throughout history. His name alone out of the loyal disciples has been remembered for his fault. Before we explore the reasons behind that

infamy, it might be useful to provide some post-resurrection biography. History tells us that Thomas went all over modern-day Iran with his missions, serving an important role in remote outposts of the early church. He then apparently made his way to the Western coast of India, where he established seven centers of Christianity. There has been some dispute over his actions in India, due to the apocryphal Acts of Thomas and Gospel of Thomas. But we do know that, when the Portuguese arrived in 1498 to civilize India and establish trading lines, that they encountered something of a wrench in the works, discovering a community of two million Christians descended from these Christian centers, and independent of the Bishop of Rome. These Christians traced their history back to St. Thomas.¹ So, despite the fact that Thomas is remembered in the western tradition as the Doubter on this weekend after Easter, he seems to have done all right by himself preaching to the furthest reaches of Christendom.

With a little bit of this background to his life, we turn to the question of why Thomas has become such a notorious character in history, and whether his famous doubting episode really ought to overshadow the important work he did later.

In the days leading up to Jesus's death and resurrection, Thomas asked two questions of his teacher. John tells us that, as Jesus informed his followers at the Last Supper that his time on earth was nearing an end and assured them that they could follow him, Thomas responded with an honest query. "Lord, we DO NOT know where you are going; how CAN we know the way?"

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http://www.answers.com/main/ntquery?method=4&dsid=2222&dekey=Thomas+%28apostle%29&gwp=8&curtab=2222_1, among others.

As we heard today, Thomas responds to the news that Christ has returned with a demand to see proof.

Jesus was famous for speaking truth to Power. Are we really to believe that he wished to scold and reprimand Thomas for doing the same thing? Particularly because Thomas's peculiar sin seems to have been to be absent when Jesus arrived to meet the disciples.

Imagine, if you will, that you have dedicated your life to the ministry of the Son of God. You have witnessed his cruel death and along with his other dedicated followers, you are grieving and debating what your next steps must be. At the end of a long and arduous session, you draw lots to see whose turn it is to fetch the pizza, and the job falls to you. Now, when you return from your task, you find a room full of your compatriots, all in a divine ecstasy, "You should have been here, Thomas. You just missed Jesus. He said to tell you that he is risen, and all is well." Imagine your reaction to this scene. Is it to immediately celebrate that which the others have seen and you have not, or is it to taste some bitterness in your mouth and wonder why it was that you were denied this particular pleasure? After all, you were just as worthy as your colleagues, and yet they were gifted with the chance to see Jesus, one last time. Finally, imagine that you are Thomas, and able to see two thousand years into the future, and that, to add insult to injury, people remember YOU as the guy that didn't know a good thing when you didn't see it. I would expect Thomas to be a little upset with the way things turned out. For take note of what Thomas actually missed. He missed the chance to see Jesus. History remembers him poorly for having the temerity to insist that he get the chance to see Jesus as the other disciples had. For they all saw Jesus and did not need to have faith that he was risen. All the rest of the disciples had proof.

So here we have the acts of Thomas. They do not seem to be overly compelling evidence that we should remember him infamously. But perhaps we'll find them unique among the others.

Shall we turn to the most famous of disciples, especially on this weekend when the thoughts and prayers of all Christians are focused on Rome? The father of the Catholic Church, who stands steadfast guard at the gates of heaven and whose name is enshrined in countless spirituals and anthems, St. Peter. Was he not the most loyal of the disciples, standing firm in his association up until the end? When the Roman soldiers came, didn't he say, "Yes. I follow Jesus. What of it?" No, before that cock crowed, Peter had denied Jesus three times. But today, he is St. Peter of the Golden Keys, the arbiter of heaven. He is not "Denying Peter." Surely this betrayal of Jesus ranks higher than a set of thoughtful questions. And yet, and yet, culture remembers only the good.

A close examination of John's account of the Last Supper reveals that Thomas was not the only doubter at the table. Philip said to Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father and we shall be satisfied." Is this not an equal expression of doubt to Thomas? Yet Philip's apparent transgression does not see trial in the court of public opinion. Though, I suppose that Thomas is at least widely remembered, and Philip has more or less been forgotten as an individual.

Well, we've now seen two disciples with equal or greater claims to infamy than Thomas who have gotten off scot-free. If we dig deeper into the text, can we find any others? Luke tells us that two disciples, whose names I suppose they are glad are lost to history, encountered a

stranger along the road. After walking with this man, debating philosophy, and eating with him, they realized that they had been in the presence of the resurrected Christ, only to see him disappear like the Holy Grail.² And yet, there is no punchy reference to inattentiveness. One does not hear drill sergeants asking recruits, “What are you, some kind of blockheaded disciple?”

So it appears that Thomas has gotten something of a bad rap, singled out by history for ASKING A QUESTION and demanding to see only what his colleagues saw before him. Was it really unreasonable for Thomas to want to replicate the experience of his friends? Was it unreasonable for him to ask these questions? And do we even know if he was motivated by doubt? One could certainly imagine that it was the overwhelming desire to see his master again that drove him, rather than true doubt of the news. Would it not be natural to attempt to goad Jesus into appearing one last time, if you knew he was up to the task? So, perhaps we remember Thomas for a reason other than his own doubting nature.

I argue that Thomas is remembered because his question *is* more important than the behavior of the other apostles. But in remembering the story, we forget the lesson. We remembered that it was important, and so gave it a name, “the story of Doubting Thomas.” But, as with all sound bytes, we eventually forgot the depth behind the label. We forgot that the story does not end at Thomas’s question.

² Luke 24:13-32

For this story is not about Doubt, but belief. Jesus does not say to Thomas, “you are not blessed, because you have seen.” He says, “blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe.” The message he gives is not meant for Thomas, or for the Disciples. They have all seen him already, and the message is therefore meaningless for them. That message is meant for us. Thomas has suffered two thousand years of abuse and ridicule in order that we remember, year after year, that there are special blessings reserved for those of us who do not have the opportunity to see, as they had. Thomas’s questioning has nothing to do with unreasonable doubt. Thomas gives us a good model for our own faith; when something seems fantastic, too good to be true, question it. Ask the tough questions of those in power. Make sure your answers are satisfied. But Jesus’s answer to Thomas reminds us that, at the end of the questioning, the answers must come from within ourselves. We do not have to see to believe, but have the ability to have faith. The great blessing of Thomas is the freedom from visual certainty for all of us.

We do not have the opportunity to ask Jesus, “Christ, is it you? Have you truly RISEN from the grave?” So Thomas, that poor abandoned disciple so ill-treated by history asked the question for us. And that question gave Christ the opportunity to say, “you, Thomas, have seen and believe. But those who come after you, who will not be able to see, need not see. They will be blessed because they will believe without seeing.” Thomas and his disciples did not have the opportunity to test their faith as we do. They SAW Christ, and so died not knowing whether they truly had faith in his resurrection. They were denied the chance to doubt, and meditate, and answer the question FOR THEMSELVES. That blessing, the ability

to know true faith, was given to those who followed. And that, finally, is the blessing of Thomas.

Peter's first letter says, 'Without having seen him you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy. As the outcome of your faith you obtain the salvation of your souls.'³ So remember that it was Thomas who gave you the opportunity to experience this unutterable and exalted joy the next time someone unthinkingly refers to Doubting Thomas.

³ 1 Peter 1:8-9