

“Praising Thomas”

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A reflection for the 4th Sunday of Easter

John 20.24-31

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Thomas, called “the Twin,” who was one of the Twelve, wasn’t with the others when Jesus came. The other disciples told him, “*We’ve seen the Lord!*” But he replied, “*Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, put my finger in the wounds left by the nails, and put my hand into his side, I won’t believe.*”

Poor Thomas. Folks are always sticking that “Doubting” thing in front of his name. No one calls him, “Willing to stick with Jesus to death” Thomas. (Check out John 11:16). Or “Asks great questions” Thomas (that’s John 14:5). Not even just “Disciple of Jesus” Thomas.¹ Never mind, “Might have moved to India and started the first Christian community there” Thomas. (That’s an ancient tradition about him.)²

Nope. He steps out of the room for a few minutes, misses Jesus, and he’s forever the “Doubting” guy.

Some think doubting is bad. Because he doubted Jesus’ resurrection, Thomas has been called “crass,” “slow,” “backward,” “hard,” “stubborn.”³ The fact he missed that meeting has been spun into the message: “That’s why thou shalt not skip worship!”⁴ (In the preaching business, we call that “stretching it.”)

For others, though, Doubting Thomas is a hero. We know that having doubts can open the door to discovery. A few centuries ago, the “Age of Enlightenment” dawned. The big idea was, don’t trust traditions that have been handed down to us. We must figure things out ourselves, using our own senses and our own reason.

We have inherited this. Catch the irony? This idea that we cannot trust traditions is itself a tradition we have received from those who have gone before. So should we trust it? We did not figure out for ourselves that we need to figure things out for ourselves; people taught us that. Many current philosophers are asking hard questions about this whole “Enlightenment” project. Still, it has wisdom in it.

¹ Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; John 21:2; Acts 1:13.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_the_Apostle

³ Citing the words of John Chrysostom (5th century), Matthew Henry and J. A. Bengel (both 18th century). See Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John, A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 1182, 1183, 1190.

⁴ Matthew Henry, cited in Bruner, 1183.

II

The earliest accounts of Jesus, the Gospels in the Bible, are quite clear about something. Each of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John tell the perhaps-embarrassing truth that some of those closest to Jesus doubted that he had risen from the dead.

Mark: The eleven [remaining disciples] *“had not believed those who saw him after he had risen.”*⁵

Luke: *“These words [from the women who saw and spoke to Jesus] seemed to [the apostles] an idle tale, and they did not believe them.”*⁶

Matthew: *“The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted.”*⁷ (They were with him, and they doubted!)

And in John’s Gospel, we have Doubting Thomas.

They do not cover this up. They don’t spin a tale of a confident consensus. These Gospel writers were too committed to telling the truth, the whole truth. Which includes the fact that Jesus often left his disciples scratching their heads and rubbing their eyes.

Wouldn’t they have been crazy if they did not have at least some questions, at least a moderate amount of uncertainty, at least a little bit of “You sure about that?” If that was them, surely it is okay for us too.

Here’s the problem, though. Whether we are celebrating or criticizing him, we can stick Thomas with the “Doubting” thing, using Crazy Glue, so it never comes off. But his story doesn’t end where Jessica paused. By God’s grace, there is more!

⁵ Mark 16:14. Most scholars believe this ending of Mark’s Gospel (16:9-20) was not part of the original text but added later. Perhaps the original ending was lost, or maybe it always ended in the abrupt fashion we see in 16:8. So the line in verse 14 was likely a later addition. Still, it is evidence of a willingness within the earliest Christian communities to acknowledge the doubts the first apostles experienced.

⁶ Luke 24:11.

⁷ Matthew 28:16-17.

III

A week later, Jesus's disciples were again in a house and Thomas was with them. Even though the doors were locked, Jesus entered and stood in the middle of them. He said, *"Peace to you."*

Then he said to Thomas, *"Put your finger here. Look at my hands. Put your hand into my side. No more disbelief. Believe!"*

Thomas responded to Jesus, *"My Lord and my God!"*

Jesus replied, *"Do you believe because you see me? Blessed are those who don't see and yet believe."*

Then Jesus did many other miraculous signs in his disciples' presence, signs that aren't recorded in this scroll. But these things are written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Messiah, God's Son, and that believing, you will have life in his name.

Adapted from The Common English Bible (CEB) translation

Did you notice? The other disciples already believed. Thomas did not (not yet). They were all still together. The others had seen Jesus alive. Jesus had commissioned them to tell others. Thomas was their first evangelistic opportunity! These newly Spirit-filled witnesses gave him their Spirit-filled witness.⁸ And . . . it did not work. Thomas did not believe. And they kept community with him. A believer or not, they loved him. There is something here for us to hear, for when we share our faith with others.

Did you notice? When Jesus comes again, and Thomas finally sees for himself, Jesus does not rebuke him. His doubts were not a problem for Jesus, but an opportunity to show him. There is something here for us to hear, for when we share our faith with others.

Did you notice? It's Jesus who removes Thomas's doubt. Now matter how great the disciples witnessed, or how well they loved, Jesus created his faith. On his timetable! Jesus showed up when Jesus wanted to show up. Did he know the right time for Thomas to see him? I wonder. There is something here for us to hear, when we share our faith with others.

Our job is simply this: tell what we have seen and heard. Whatever happens, always love and welcome. Jesus will use us. His Spirit will move us to tell what we have seen and heard. His Spirit will move us to love and welcome. Jesus gives us important things to do. Still, in the end, faith is between Jesus and each person. That's good news! We can entrust people to him.

⁸ Bruner, 1185.

IV

While we're at it . . . did you notice? Upon seeing Jesus, "Doubting Thomas" becomes "Believing Thomas." And "Believing Thomas" becomes "Praising Thomas."

"My Lord and my God!"

My God: God, the Creator. God, the life-Giver. God, the covenant-Maker.

My Lord: The Lord of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekkah, Jacob . . . and Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah (long story).⁹ The Lord called to Moses from a burning bush. The Lord led God's People to freedom. The Lord gave the Torah on Mount Sinai. *"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."*¹⁰ *"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me."*¹¹

"My Lord and my God!"

Thomas addresses Jesus with language jealously reserved for the Lord God. From the lips of formerly-doubting Thomas comes the highest exaltation of Jesus we find in all the Gospels.¹²

These particular words of praise had special resonance when the Gospel of John was being crafted together from earlier sources. It was toward the end of the 1st century. The Emperor at the time was Domitian. People addressed him as *"Dominus et Deus,"* "Lord and God." Thomas' praise is counter-cultural. It is a subversive claim against the powers, about who is really in charge.¹³

When does Thomas pour out this praise? Not simply when he sees Jesus. When he beholds his wounds. The Risen Jesus: wounded, pierced, brutalized, rejected, crucified.

Every reason to doubt. Except, it is true! *"My Lord and My God!"*

⁹ Genesis 29-30.

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

¹¹ Exodus 20:2-3. Raymond Brown wrote, "it is Thomas who makes clear that one may address Jesus in the same language in which Israel addressed Yahweh. Now is fulfilled the will of the Father . . . "that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father" (John 5:23)." Quoted in Bruner 1183.

¹² "This is the only time that Jesus is addressed as God in the fourfold Gospel. Jesus is not often called God in the remaining New Testament literature either." Bruner, 1188.

¹³ Bruner, 1192. This is alleged by Suetonius and Cassius Dio, historians writing after Domitian's time. Whether these titles were used by Domitian himself or his followers is debated. Either way, pretensions to divinity by Domitian and other caesars is well-attested. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Domitian>

V

Finally, did you notice? We are blessed. Jesus blesses us, and all those who believe, who trust, who give themselves to him, though we have not seen.

Because of Jesus' blessing, the community of disciples is not limited. It's not limited to those that evening, nor those who saw the week before, or in the weeks to follow. Maybe they had an advantage over us; still, we share the blessing of Jesus with them. We hear their witness — *"We have seen the Lord!"* We share their doubts, their struggle. And, like Thomas, our doubts need not stick to us and leave us stuck. No, Jesus, his Spirit moving in us, brings doubts so we can move toward discovery. So we can be blessed with those first disciples, including Thomas, profess with them, *"We believe!"* and praise with them, *"My Lord and my God!"*