

John 20:24-31

Introduction

After the risen Jesus had already made four previous appearances (one to Mary Magdalene, one to Mary the mother of James, and Joanna, and Salome, and the other women, one to Peter, and one to Cleopas and His companion), we saw last week the fifth appearance of Jesus on that first resurrection Sunday. Jesus came to the disciples as they were meeting together behind closed doors for fear of the Jews, and announced to them the Gospel of His peace — of eschatological peace: “Peace be with you.”

I. John 20:24 — But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came.

“Thomas” is the Hebrew word for “twin” spelled with Greek letters. “Didymas” is the Greek word for “twin.” So apparently Thomas was a twin brother and was called “twin” (there are other examples of this outside of the Bible). We don’t know who the other twin was or what Thomas’ given name was. Each of the other Gospels mentions Thomas only one time — in the list of the twelve disciples (Mat. 10:3; Mk. 3:18; Lk. 6:15). But in John, we’re given a little more insight into who Thomas was.

John 11

In chapter eleven, when Jesus was planning to go up from Galilee to Judea to raise Lazarus from the dead:

- John 11:8 — The disciples said to Him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone You, and are You going there again?”

When it became clear that Jesus could not be dissuaded from this course of action:

- John 11:16 — Thomas, who is called Didymus, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, so that we may die with Him.”

What do these words tell us about Thomas? On the one hand, Thomas is a true disciple of Jesus and any willingness to die with someone reflects devotion, and probably even a kind of courage. On the other hand, Thomas assumes defeat when defeat is not at all certain. He may not understand fully the meaning of these words of Jesus, but they certainly don’t encourage a gloomy pessimism.

- John 11:9–11 — “Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.” [Jesus] said these things, and after that He said to [the disciples], “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, so that I may awaken him.”

We use words like pessimism and gloom, but maybe Thomas would have preferred to call it being realistic. The facts are that Jesus has so far rejected the acclaim of the crowds who “love” Him (Jn. 6:15) while the religious authorities hate Him and are seeking to kill Him. Where is that going to lead? There’s a sense in which Thomas sees more clearly than his fellow disciples. This time, Jesus *is* going up to Judea to die. It will be the raising of Lazarus that sets in motion the events leading to His death (cf. 11:45-53). Remember what Peter said to Jesus when He spoke of His sufferings and death: “God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You” (Mat. 16:22). Perhaps we could say that Peter was an “optimist.” He believed Jesus was the Messiah, and so he believed—despite the “facts”—that Jesus could not possibly die at the hand of the Jews. Thomas, on the other hand, is a “realist.” He wants to believe that Jesus is the Messiah. He wants to believe that Jesus isn’t destined for death at the hands of the Jews. But now he’s not so sure. He’s a “realist”—if not a pessimist—and even if others can, he can’t ignore the “facts.” Already, his belief that Jesus is the promised Messiah is being shaken. We think of John the Baptist when he sent word to Jesus, saying, “Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?” (Mat. 11:2-3). “Thomas... said to his fellow disciples, ‘Let us also go, so that we may die with Him.’”

From our vantage point we can see that Thomas isn’t interpreting the “facts” rightly. He rightly sees death in store for Jesus, but supposes that he will be called upon to die with Him. What he doesn’t *see* is that the death of Jesus will be in his place. He rightly sees death in store for Jesus, but assumes that this death must be a defeat. What he doesn’t *see* is that in Jesus’ case death itself will be triumph and victory. Thomas is a realist. He deals in the facts. But what happens when we can’t see *all* the facts?—Or when we don’t understand the facts that we do see, and so we misinterpret them?

John 14

In chapter fourteen, when Jesus was with His disciples in the upper room after Judas has gone out to betray Him, He said to them:

- John 14:1-4 — “Do not let your heart be troubled; **believe** in God, **believe** also in Me. In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also. **And you know the way where I am going.**”

From our vantage point today, we can make sense of Jesus’ words. Where is Jesus’ going? He’s going to His Father (“In My Father’s house are many dwelling places... I go to prepare a place for you...”) And what is the way to where Jesus is going? The way to the Father is Jesus (“believe in God, believe also in Me...”). But the disciples couldn’t understand. When Jesus says to them before His crucifixion, “And you know the way where I am going,” He’s not saying, “And you understand what I mean.” His point is rather, “Whether you realize it or not, you do know the way to where I am going.” The disciples know the way—whether they realize it or not—because they know Jesus (cf. Jn. 17:6-8); because Jesus is the way to where He is going (cf. 14:6). When Jesus says to the disciples, “And you know the way where I am going,” it would be

perfectly legitimate for them to ask: “And what is this ‘way’ that we already know?” Instead, Thomas says to Jesus:

- John 14:5 — “Lord, we do not know where You are going. How do we know the way?”

Thomas addresses Jesus with respect and honor as “Lord.” Thomas is a true Israelite who believes the prophets and God’s promises of a coming Messiah. And yet he’s still plagued with the desire to deal in the simple “facts” as he sees and understands them. And the “fact” is that he doesn’t know *where* Jesus is going. Therefore, he doesn’t see how he can possibly know the *way* to where Jesus is going. Is this a genuine question motivated by faith (“How can we know the way?”) or is it a subtle contradiction motivated by “realism” (cf. Mat. 16:22)? Thomas’ “realism”—his commitment to the facts as He sees and understands them—is struggling and competing with his faith. And Thomas isn’t alone.

- John 14:6–7 — Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through Me. If you have come to know Me, you will know My Father also; **from now on you know Him, and have seen Him.**”

To which Philip responded:

- John 14:8 — “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.”

Instead of beginning with the assumption that he *has* seen the Father (as Jesus has just said), and asking *how* it is that he has seen Him, Philip begins with the assumption that he has *not* seen the Father, and that if Jesus would simply show them the Father, then they would all immediately understand. But in fact, Jesus has been showing them the Father all along, and they still are not understanding. So Jesus answered Philip:

- John 14:9–10 — “Have I been with you all so long and have you not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me?”

On the one hand, Thomas is a man of faith. He believes in the God of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and He believes in the promises of the Messiah. On the other hand, Thomas is a “realist” who’s committed to the facts—the facts as he sees and understands them. This is the Thomas who, in God’s wise and loving providence, was not there with the other disciples when Jesus came to them on that first resurrection Sunday.

II. John 20:25 — So the other disciples were saying to him, “We have seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.”

Is Thomas really so different from the other disciples? When Mary Magdalene and the other women who had gone to the tomb told them that they had seen Jesus, their words “appeared to them as nonsense, and they were not believing them” (Lk. 24:11). When the disciples said to Cleopas and his companion, “The Lord has really risen and has appeared to Simon” (Lk. 24:34),

this was probably more an expression of how much they *wanted* to believe than anything else. When Jesus did appear to them, they were “startled and frightened... thinking that they were seeing a spirit” (Lk. 24:37).

- Luke 24:38–43 — And [Jesus] said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do *doubts* arise in your hearts? See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; touch Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” And when He had said this, He showed them His hands and His feet. And while they still were *not believing* because of their joy and were still marveling, He said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” They gave Him a piece of a broiled fish, and He took it and ate it before them.

Given the fact that all the disciples doubted, is it really fair for us to label Thomas, “Doubting Thomas”? It *is* only Thomas who expresses his “doubt” with such obstinacy in the face of five separate eye-witness testimonies and the unanimous witness of the rest of the disciples. However, it’s not that Thomas doesn’t want to believe. He wants to believe with all his heart. And it’s not that Thomas is saying, categorically, that he won’t believe. He’s saying that he will believe *if only* he can see in Jesus hands the imprint of the nails, and put his finger into the place of the nails, and put his hand into His side. I think Thomas is just being more honest with himself than the other disciples had been when they professed to believe that Jesus was risen and had appeared to Simon. He’s a “realist,” after all. His words imply that he, too, was there at the cross, and that with his own eyes he had seen Jesus with pierced hands and pierced side dead upon the cross. How, then, can he be expected to believe that Jesus is alive unless he sees Him alive with his own eyes?

But *therein* lies the problem. For Thomas, this is still simply a matter of believing—or not believing—that *Jesus is alive*. It’s still just a matter of confirming something that he is capable, on his own, of comprehending: Jesus is either dead—or He is alive. In this sense, we could perhaps say that “to see is to believe.” But the mere fact that Jesus is alive is not ultimately what Thomas is called to believe.

For a whole week, Thomas went on wishing to believe, but refusing to believe.

III. John 20:26–27 — And after eight days [on the following Sunday, the first day of the week] His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors having been shut, and stood in their midst and said, “Peace be with you.” Then He said to Thomas, “Bring your finger here, and see My hands; and bring your hand here and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing.”

What, exactly, is Jesus calling Thomas to believe? “Bring your finger here, and see My hands; and bring your hand here and put it into My side.” Do not disbelieve that I have risen, but believe that I have risen! But is that all that Jesus is calling Thomas to believe?—Believe that I am alive?

The resurrection of Jesus is the one “fact” that finally makes “*sense*” of all that Jesus has said and done throughout His entire earthly ministry, up to and including His death. The resurrection of Jesus is that single, supreme “fact” that finally enables us to understand and to comprehend *by*

faith everything that Jesus has said and done for the salvation of our souls. It's the resurrection of Jesus that will finally enable Thomas to understand by faith these words of Jesus:

- John 14:1-4, 6-7 — “Do not let your heart be troubled; *believe* in God, *believe* also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also. **And you know the way where I am going**... I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through Me. If you have come to know Me, you will know My Father also; **from now on you know Him, and have seen Him.**”

Jesus isn't simply calling Thomas to believe that He's alive. He's calling him to believe that He is the way to the Father and that to know Him and to see Him is to know and see the Father. “Bring your finger here, and see My hands; and bring your hand here and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing” — in the fullest, richest, and most wonderful sense of that word.

IV. John 20:28 — Thomas answered and said to Him, “My Lord and my God!”

Can you see how astonishing and how wonderful this is? Here is a confession of faith that transcends by far anything Thomas could ever “know” based simply upon the “facts.” This is no longer Thomas the “realist.” In just a single moment, that old Thomas has gone forever. This isn't the Thomas who supposes that seeing is the key to his faith. Instead, this is the Thomas whose faith now enables him to see. He believes, now, not just that Jesus is alive. He believes—and understands—now, the word that Jesus spoke — that in Jesus He sees the Father, and that Jesus is, Himself, the way to the Father, and that therefore to believe in God (as Thomas does) is to believe in Jesus, and to believe in Jesus is to believe in God. And so it's Thomas of all people, the previously “unyielding [realist and] skeptic[,] [who] has bequeathed to us the most profound confession [of faith]” (Carson). If Jesus' words to the disciples were the first post-resurrection proclamation of the Gospel, then Thomas' words here represent the very first confession of faith. “*Thomas* answered and said to [Jesus], ‘My Lord and my God!’” (cf. Jn. 1:1; 5:23).

How did Thomas finally arrive at this confession of faith? Not ultimately on the basis of what he had seen, but on the basis of the sovereign word of Jesus: “Do not be unbelieving, but believing” (cf. Mat. 16:16-17). Believe not just that I am alive, but believe now the word that I have spoken which demands that I must be alive!

“Thomas answered and said to [Jesus], ‘My Lord and my God!’”

V. John 20:29a — Jesus said to him, “Because you have seen Me, you have believed.”

Some translations make this a question—“Because you have seen Me, have you believed?”—which implies that Jesus is casting doubt on the validity of Thomas' confession (“have you really believed?”; cf. ESV; NASB; LSB; NET; NRSV). But I don't believe that's what Jesus is doing or saying, and so I don't believe it should be translated as a question (cf. NIV; HCSB; ASV; NKJV; NLT). Jesus is drawing attention to what has so far been true of all the disciples. They've all

believed that Jesus is alive—at least initially—because they saw Him. This wasn't an inferior or less authentic faith or a faith somehow less pleasing to God. Remember that Thomas was never “unbelieving” in the absolute sense of the word, and neither were any of the other disciples (except for Judas Iscariot). They all believed, all along, in the God of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob who had spoken through Moses and the prophets. They all believed, all along, and *now* they believe that Jesus has risen from the dead *because they have seen Him*.^{*} But this begs the question not of the validity of their faith, but of our faith. What about now that Jesus has gone away into heaven? What about us who have never seen Jesus? Is our faith inferior? Is our faith somehow less legitimate—less certain than theirs?

The answer to this question can be found first of all in Thomas himself. Thomas believed, at first, because he saw (“to see was to believe”). But seeing cannot finally explain Thomas’ confession—“My Lord and my God!” In the end, Thomas discovered that “to believe is to see.” By faith, Thomas came to see what the resurrection of Jesus meant, and therefore that the resurrection of Jesus had to be (“My Lord and my God!”).

If we arrive at this faith without ever seeing ourselves, is this faith somehow inferior—somehow less valid or certain—than the faith of those who did see with their own eyes? This is the question that Jesus Himself now answers for us. First, we hear the gentle reproof in Jesus words to Thomas after showing him His hands and side: “Do not be unbelieving, but believing.” Jesus isn’t calling Thomas to a second-rate faith — a “faith” based only on seeing. He’s calling Thomas to the same faith to which He calls all of us. There’s no judgment here of the quality of Thomas’ faith (that’s not the issue!), but only of the validity of his unbelief. As Thomas himself can now see and understand, he should have believed, and he could have believed, without seeing. And so Jesus continues:

VI. John 20:29b — “Blessed are those [or, blessed will all those be] who did not see, and yet believed.”

Again, the point here is not the inferiority of Thomas’ faith, as though he is less blessed than others. The point is rather that our faith, the faith of those who have never seen, is in no way inferior to the faith of those first disciples who did see. On the one hand, Jesus reproves Thomas for his unbelief before he saw. On the other hand, Jesus pronounces us to be equally blessed with Thomas — we who have believed even though we have never seen. As even Thomas himself came to understand: “To believe *is* to see.”

It’s in the light of this example of Thomas and these wonderful words of Jesus that the Apostle John concludes:

VII. John 20:30–31 — Therefore many other signs Jesus also did in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you [*who have not seen*] may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.

^{*} Of course, it would be foolish to believe that Jesus was alive if no one had seen Him alive!—Or even if only a single witness had seen Him alive (cf. Deut. 17:6; 19:15; Mat. 18:16; 2 Cor. 13:1; 1 Tim. 5:19; Heb. 10:28).

To believe *is* to see. By faith we see what the resurrection of Jesus means, and therefore that the resurrection of Jesus had to be. And so without ever having seen Jesus, “[we] love Him,” and we say to Him “with joy inexpressible and full of glory” (1 Pet. 1:8), “My Lord and My God!”