

# The Doubt of Thomas

John 20.19-31

4.4.21 (Easter 2021)

*So when it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." <sup>20</sup> And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. The disciples then rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup> So Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you." <sup>22</sup> And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup> "If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained."*

*<sup>24</sup> But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup> 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."*

*<sup>26</sup> After eight days 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." <sup>27</sup> Then He said to Thomas, "Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing." <sup>28</sup> Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!" <sup>29</sup> Jesus said to him, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed."*

*<sup>30</sup> Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; <sup>31</sup> but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.*

**We've been looking at the Four Gospels since just after Christmas – we do this every year between Christmas and Easter.**

Today, of course, we come to the conclusion or climax or the peak moment – i.e. when the Main Character makes good on the repeated promises He's made that HE WILL DIE and THREE DAYS LATER RISE FROM THE DEAD.

He comes, in all four Gospels like a New Adam out of the Garden... breathing new life into the world and initiating a new creation, a new international-race. He comes, in John's version, breathing the Life of God, the Holy Spirit on to, IN to, His Apostles.

We think of the Genesis account when God breathes life into the clay and it becomes a living being. Then God places the man in the Garden to cultivate and keep it. But the man looks for freedom outside of God. It, death, enters our story.

We can't miss the symbolism that the New Adam, Jesus Christ, the God-Man, undoes the damage when He goes back into that Garden Tomb, into the earth from which we came and undoes death. Then, He breathes New Life those who believe.

Today, we meet the man who missed church, Thomas the Doubter. He becomes for us a vehicle or occasion to consider our own doubt. What's the nature of doubt, unbelief, belief, seeing, evidence?

What is the relationship between evidence and trust? Is believing a way to know something or is believing an alternative to knowing, to science and evidence and logic?

All these questions and others are raised in the Doubting Thomas episode. So let's dive in and look at three words central to the episode:

**1) Doubt**

**2) Evidence**

**3) Faith**

DOUBT: let's make three observations. First, believers struggle with doubt. John the Baptist doubted. He was the herald of Jesus Christ's coming but John expected judgment and when he saw Jesus healing and forgiving, John began to doubt (Luke 7.19) So from prison he sent word to Jesus, asking, "Are YOU really the One we've been expecting or someone else?"

Other believers doubted even after the Resurrection: Mat 28.17 "When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some were doubtful." (17)

Here, the disciples of Jesus had heard Him announce again and again, "I will be killed and be raised on the third day" and yet here they're struggling with doubt. They're hiding, afraid the Temple police are coming next for THEM!

One of the disciples isn't even there. Maybe, absent Thomas is grieving on his own (some people go that way). But when they tell Thomas what he missed at church that Sunday, he answered, "I WILL NOT believe!"

Second observation about doubt is that there are apparently varieties of it. We saw a few weeks back that Judas doubted and never recovered. He'd heard all Jesus Christ's sermons and seen His signs and miracles but in the end he apparently did not believe.

Thomas has his own variety of doubt or unbelief.

Doubt isn't evil in itself but it's always potentially harmful spiritually. If we could chart it on a spectrum, we might say that when Doubt gains momentum it can degenerate into Unbelief. And unbelief is the root of all sin (Rom 14.23; Heb 11.6, 12.1).

A third note on doubt is that when doubt becomes unbelief, it's never purely intellectual. There's always a volitional, motivational, a desire-factor in unbelief. At some point, when doubt becomes unbelief, it's because we choose it.

When people say, "I won't believe until all my questions are answered" that statement really misses the point that our questions are not purely motivated by perfect intellectual integrity. And beneath those questions are desires. We don't WANT to believe because we think that if we DID believe, it would require changes we don't want.

And that's NOT to say that questions and intellect are unimportant (Christianity values the life of the mind and logic and rationality). Faith, as we'll see, is NOT a leap into absurdity but unbelief is never MERELY intellectual – the will is always involved.

And that brings us to the SECOND main point: what is the relationship between faith and facts? If we need evidence, is it no longer properly called faith?

Well, Christian thinkers have always held that faith has content. There are, in part, facts to believe; there are claims and there is evidence. That's the second point. What IS the evidence for Christianity?

Well, Jesus Christ IS the evidence. He came, resurrected, to Mary Magdalene and she SEES Him. He shows His wounds to the disciples.

He made big claims: to be the remedy for what ails the human race (the atoning sacrifice for sin). He claims to be the incarnation of God – that in Him, God has taken to Himself a human body and human nature, that God has materialized as a human being and come to this fallen planet; claimed that He is the Way for human beings to be reconciled to God.

And after He's crucified for making those claims, Jesus Christ rises from the dead (just as He claimed He would). The resurrection IS the evidence verifying those claims.

He appears. He's observable, verifiable, substantial, physical. He shows His wounds to say, "Look! It's really Me. See the scars! I've returned from the Battle and I won – death is dead and I am alive."

When He comes to the doubting/unbelieving disciples He repeats the greeting, "Peace!" (3x) It's the summary of His life and work: "I made peace between the Holy God and sinful, self-centered human beings – shalom for all who believe!"

And then He commissions these disciples, “As the Father sent Me – so I send YOU!” And He breathes on them; breathes New Life in them as He once breathed the first human souls to life in the Garden; the genesis of a New Humanity.

He gives these young men, the outrageous authority to forgive sins or to retain sins. He seals/empowers that calling with the Spirit of Life. He’s saying, “You will, through your words spoken and written, you will be My witnesses. You’re the chosen guardians of My teaching – but even more important of My resurrection. How people respond to your testimony determines whether their sins are forgiven or retained. Your witness is the watershed issue.”

Then Thomas, who wasn’t there, does NOT receive their witness, rejects the testimony of his brother (20.18) disciples. He says, “I want more than YOUR testimony – I have to see it myself! Unless I can see and touch His wounds I WON’T believe! Resurrections don’t happen!”

And when Jesus Christ comes AGAIN, that next Sunday in His resurrected Body. Somehow, it's the same Body and somehow, it's NEW – somehow able to eat and also able to enter a locked room. When He comes the next Sunday, He uses redemptive shame to awaken Thomas, “Peace.” (third time!) “Go ahead: do what you need to do in order to believe!”

And Thomas is stunned, “My Lord and my God!” The Doubter makes the clearest identification of Jesus in the whole book. Thomas NAMES Jesus for who He really IS: Lord and God! And then Jesus Christ says, “Thomas, you believe because you see; blessed are those who believe but don’t see.”

In other words, “Please recognize the privilege that’s yours in getting this special appearance... because this is IT... After 40 more days of My appearing to you witnesses, from then on...people will have to take your word for it. People will believe or not based NOT on the direct evidence YOU’RE getting but on the basis of your testimony! You’ll be the evidence, the witnesses, the testimony to the world.”

“Blessed are those who believe without seeing” – that’s us! So many of us, not all of us... some don’t believe but if you DO believe today... it’s NOT because Jesus Christ appeared to you but because of this historical document, the accumulated testimony of the eyewitnesses preserved and transmitted in writing from one generation to the next. That’s why we call it the “Apostolic Church”.

See, on one hand, it’s NOT a leap into irrationality – it’s real evidence carefully presented and bearing all the marks of authentic, historical record. On the other hand, it’s NOT an answer to your whims and your personal demands that say, “I’m not going to believe until I get to see and touch!”

Sorry. Thomas and the other apostles got special treatment (and martyrdom) but you and I aren't going to get that kind of evidence.

And that brings up our last point: "So, what you're saying is, 'To really believe the Gospel and live the Christian life – to get the peace and joy and relief like the Apostles got – we have to take someone else's word for it? That's what it means to have faith?'"

And the answer is – "Yeah! Just like you take the word of historians that there was a French Emperor named Napoleon... a queen in ancient Egypt named Cleopatra...a philosopher named Plato, a ruler of the Mongol Empire named Genghis Khan – you haven't seen any of these figures but you trust the eyewitnesses, the historians.

So too, you have to trust THESE authorized witnesses and their testimony.

And you may object – "Yeah, but these other individuals from history left behind proof, inventions and discoveries and monuments – they changed the course of history!"

Well, no one has changed history like the Resurrected Man. His influence has changed innumerable lives and the whole human story. And IF He did not rise from the dead it's the greatest hoax of all time. The Apostles all died because having seen Him, they could not lie about it. If it was all a fabrication, why were these witnesses willing to lose their families and loves and LIVES? You don't die for something you know to be a lie.

And a monument? Do you know about Jesus Christ's monument? It's the CHURCH – millions and BILLIONS of lives that have been transformed, sins forgiven, peace, joy, hope, purpose, RELIEF from the prison of moral regret and real guilt.

I'll end on this – unbelief in believers and in non-believers. Church-members who believe, still deal with doubts. We have scientific questions, personal, philosophical issues: Does God really care about me? Why doesn't God stop the pain and suffering in the world? Where was God when I suffered a tremendous hurt as a child... or as a parent?

But when I doubt (and I do) it's the Cross and Resurrection that brings me back to spiritual equilibrium and trust. I can't help see that this event is different than Cleopatra or Genghis Khan - it affects me. It means something to me and more important to God.

It means that I, as someone who has received this gift from God, that I'm actually forgiven. I can't help but trust the God who loved me in this way. And I can't get away from that event that changed history and changed me... changes me daily!

'Too much evidence to ignore.

For you who are NOT church members of this or another church – who are NOT connected to the monument Jesus Christ IS building: We’re really, really glad you’re here! We want to share this with you – too good to keep to ourselves!

I want to urge you to doubt boldly. Thomas did. Be honest with someone and let them know – “I’d like to believe it’s true but what about \_\_\_\_\_?” When you can open up and doubt boldly, you may be taking the first steps to the big realization: “My Lord and my God!” Don’t act like you believe if you don’t.

AND don’t flatter yourself into thinking your doubt comes from a pure/unbiased intellect that’s just not satisfied with the evidence – evidence that has convinced some of the greatest skeptics and greatest minds the world has ever known.

Your doubt and unbelief may be rooted (more than you realize) in a desire to party or a fear of change or because you have a moral issue (or you THINK you do). Point is – you have to get open and honest about your doubts and share them like Thomas did.

As I’ve said many times before, don’t be afraid to doubt your doubts.

Share your doubts with someone who’s a “living stone” (1 Pet 2.4-5) in the Monument (a member of the church) because IN this company of people (weak, doubting people who are believing without shutting off their minds) in the Monument called the Church there’s a Ghost... a Spirit... the same Spirit the Resurrected Man breathed into His disciples, the Presence of God Himself.

When the Holy Spirit of Life – liberates you from the prison of your desires and doubts into the freedom of faith, forgiveness and New Life, you come to see that *“these things have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; **and that believing you may have life in His name.**”*