

**Thomas & the Teacher**  
First Baptist Church of Rochester  
April 24, 2021 | John 20:19-31  
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This morning is the second Sunday after Easter for us, and, for our Eastern orthodox friends, Easter morning. For the disciples in today's scripture reading, though, Easter hasn't come yet. The curtain opens with them huddled inside the home where they'd been meeting, locked away out of what John calls "fear of the Jews." They were probably traumatized after watching their friend and teacher killed by the government and worried that the same thing would happen to them. I'll bet they had the curtains drawn, doors locked, and lights out.

I wonder if they'd run straight home after Jesus's execution or forced to leave by taunting crowds and state officials. For all they knew, it was all over. Jesus had died. His mission had been cut short, and they'd been wrong about who he was. Maybe they'd all just been lonely and eager to believe in something. Maybe they had all just been a little lost in life and needed a purpose (none of them were wealthy or important by any means). Maybe Jesus had been too reckless and John the Baptist an optimist.

Now, days later, at home with the curtains drawn, they hear a knock... or something. Maybe he just walks in or shows up as a shadow at the window, but before they know what's going on, Jesus appears before them and says, "Peace be with you." To prove that it's him, he shows the disciples the wounds in his hands and side. The disciples are overwhelmed with joy. Their friend whom they thought was gone forever is standing before them, a real, living person.

But one of them wasn't there to see it. It was Thomas, who, for whatever reason was away from the house when Jesus reappeared. For Thomas, who hadn't heard the news, it was still Good Friday. We have no idea where he was. Maybe he was away grieving. We all mourn differently, after all. Some of us need to be around other people when we're mourning, while others of us need to be alone. This is just conjecture on my part, but, for whatever reason, he was missing. With no landline in the house or phones in their pockets, the disciples had no way of getting in touch with him! All they could do is wait until they saw him next and tell them... which is what they do. Could you imagine what that wait must've been like? I wonder if they ran around town shouting trying to get a hold of him. Maybe they went to his house, but didn't find him there. They might've gone to his family to see if they had seen him, but couldn't find him anywhere.

So when he finally comes back to the house a week later, they tell him, probably bursting at the seams, "We've seen the Lord!" but Thomas isn't convinced. We all

know what he says: "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe" (20:25). He stays like this for a week, unconvinced and full of doubt. While the other eleven celebrate and party, Thomas continues to grieve.

A lot of well-meaning ministers use Thomas' doubt as an opportunity to teach people about blind faith, the idea that Christians should believe in the resurrection of Jesus despite suspicion and without evidence. For these folks, Thomas teaches us what *not* to do, how *not* to respond, and what faith and discipleship *aren't*. I don't know about you, though, but I see myself most in Thomas here. You better believe I would've been right there with him had I been away from the house that day. I would've thought that the disciples were trying to trick me or that their grief had led to a shared delusion and that this misconception was just their way of processing. A woman I grew up with once told me, "Joy is not my default." I would've approached this news with suspicion, doubt, and without default joy. I would've also been upset, because, I mean, what a cruel joke to play on somebody! I can't help but feel badly for Thomas and see myself in his shoes.

This isn't the first time Thomas has stood apart from the other eleven. Eight chapters ago, as death threats against them escalated, the disciples received the news that their friend Lazarus was near the point of death. Afraid for their lives, the disciples tried to talk Jesus out of going back to Lazarus' hometown of Bethany. Jesus was determined to go back despite the dangers, and Thomas speaks up: "Let us also go, that we may die *with* him" (11:16). While the other eleven were ready to stay behind, Thomas made it clear he planned to stick with Jesus... even to die with him. He remained so loyal to his friend that he would even risk death if it meant standing by his side. The disciple's gloomy pessimism seems to me more a sign of his *devotion* to Jesus than a sour attitude or lack of belief. Rather, Thomas believed in who Jesus was so much that he was willing to put his own life second.

In fact, he appears so loyal to Jesus that, for almost every time John mentions the other eleven disciples, Thomas is named. Thomas stood by his friend through it all, through every miracle and sermon. The disciple had seen Jesus heal the sick and raise people from the dead again and again. He knew the power Jesus had over death and had seen it with his own eyes. There was no doubt in Thomas' mind that Jesus could do miraculous things. Now, hearing that Jesus himself has risen, Thomas acts as his usual self and wants visible signs.

This behavior is part of a pattern for Thomas. In addition to being loyal, Thomas has always been full of questions, ones that have inspired Jesus to say some of his most memorable words. Near the end of his ministry, after predicting his betrayal

and Peter's denial of him, Jesus comforts his disciples, telling them that he's going to prepare a place for them and that they know the way to this place. But Thomas interrupts and says, "Lord, we *don't* know where you're going, so how can we know the way?" (14:5). Jesus responds, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him" (14:6-7). Would we know Jesus as well as we do without Thomas' hangups?

Pop culture thinks otherwise. In Chaucer's 15th-century *Summoner's Tale*, the grouchy old skeptic is named Thomas. Not a very nice thing to do to the disciple who stood by the side of Jesus for so long. That's totally unfair! In a song called *Doubting Thomas* by Chris Thile, current host of Thacker Mountain Radio Show on NPR and the former lead singer of bluegrass-pop band Nickel Creek, he sings, *I'm a doubting Thomas. // Can't keep my promises. // Oh, me of little faith.* On top of this, a lot of medieval art portrays Thomas as greedy and groping, reaching out unintelligently to feel his friend's scars. Today if you call somebody a doubting Thomas, you're not saying anything nice about them.

John sometimes refers to John as Diddymus, which in Greek means *twin*, almost as if to say that Thomas reflects one of two sides of faith: the bad one. But if you ask me, the two sides of faith aren't doubt and certainty, but, instead, these two sides are part of a *polyhedron* of faith in which doubt and certainty are only *two* sides. Instead of looking at Thomas as an example of weak faith, I see him an example of faith *should* look like, a faith that stands by Jesus the whole way, even when things defy logic and questions bother us. For all the loyalty Thomas has shown Jesus across his life and ministry, the church has gotten hung up on one question he asked at the very end of it all.

Have you ever had a friend who says what everyone else is thinking? All of us have that friend; some of us might even *be* that friend. I mention this to say that John tells us nowhere that Thomas was the only one in disbelief. He may have just the only one who spoke up. I wonder who else in the room wasn't convinced when Jesus showed up. After all, the disciples have a track record for not always recognizing Jesus. Earlier in Luke's story, Jesus walks with the disciples on the road to Emmaus for miles and miles without them recognizing him until they sat down for dinner together afterwards! In John's version, when Jesus consoles Mary in the cemetery, she thinks the person whose face and voice she's known for years is a gardener. Later, when some of the disciples were fishing, Jesus calls out to them with advice for catching more fish, saying, "Cast your nets to the right side of your boat." They caught 153 fish, after which only one of them (John) recognized Jesus."

All of this is to say that sometimes it isn't until we see the *signs* of what God has been doing that we recognize Jesus around us. When they reached Emmaus, it wasn't until the disciples had shared a meal with him and been satisfied after a long journey that they knew it was him. In their boat, it wasn't until the fishermen had caught loads of fish that they knew the person on the shore was Jesus. At the cemetery, it wasn't until Mary found her grief consoled by a stranger that she was able to see Jesus in her midst. And now, locked away in a dark house, the disciples find their mourning transformed into joy and are able to recognize the risen Jesus.

I often find myself thinking about Easter happening on a bright, sunny morning. Outside, with flowers everywhere. And that was how Easter might've looked for people like Mary at daybreak in the garden when Jesus appeared to her. But for Thomas and the other disciples, Easter happened in a home of grieving people, curtains closed, wounds open. We're also reminded that Jesus isn't healed or fixed when he appears. He is broken and scarred and leaves the disciples with a charge: "As the father has sent me, so I send you," as if to say, "As wounded and imperfect as you are, as full of suspicion you may be, I am calling you to do my work in the world just as you are."

There is a reason Jesus always responded to questions with questions, anyway. Maybe he knew certainty wasn't the way to go, that faith wasn't about what we know or believe, but, rather, is about what we do. None of the good things in life need proof anyway. Instead, discipleship may be about wrestling with each other and responding in our own ways to our own experiences with Jesus. Whether we're convinced right away that the things in our lives are the work of the risen Christ or whether we need more time to realize it, it doesn't matter *when* we recognize Jesus; it only matters that we do.

In the meantime, our job is to live our lives preparing for this moment so that, when our eyes open and the risen Christ appears to *us*, we do what Thomas did, who stopped what he was doing and called Christ by name, saying, "My Lord and my God!" Amen.