

# BELIEVING DOUBT

Sermon, April 16, 2023

Texts: I John 1:1–2:2; John 20:19-31

On this first Sunday after Easter the lectionary has us looking again at the story of how the disciple Thomas earned the moniker of Doubting Thomas. The account actually begins the night of that first Easter Sunday, and then picks up the story a week later (as I've mentioned before when we've looked at this, I don't believe the "Doubting" label should necessarily be interpreted as derisive, but I'm getting ahead of myself a bit). Jesus says to Thomas, "Blessed are those who believe who have not seen." We all know the old saying, "Seeing is believing." Well, the Bible often reverses that; biblically, it is more often the case that believing is seeing. What we believe often determines how and/or what we really see. It is through the eyes of faith that we *really* begin to see. It is in believing we have hope in that which is unseen.

Yes, Thomas, blessed are the believers who have *not* seen. Blessed are the people who have come to grips with their doubts in an honest and forthright way and have made a commitment of their will to trust and believe Jesus, even though they haven't seen Him and/or know all there is to know about Him (*which, by the way, pertains to just about all of us here this morning! None of us have actually ever seen Jesus, yet you are here because of your belief. If you HAVE physically seen Jesus, I'd like to talk with you after worship!*). For one thing, there really is blessing in being a believer! I readily acknowledge there are exceptions to every rule, but generally speaking I've found people of faith are usually happier, calmer, kinder, more civil, tolerant, loving, and patient than the faithless and the cynical. I've also observed people of faith tend to be more serene and accepting when it comes to handling the blows, setbacks and disruptions that inevitably come in every person's life. There really is blessing in believing! And in the end, there is tremendous blessing in knowing the end is *not* the end ... as talked about last Sunday, we take great comfort in knowing Jesus is at the end of the world; He is the world's happy ending.

"Thomas, called Didymus ..." the Gospel text reads. I always got a bit of a chuckle out of this. I learned "Thomas" is the Aramaic word for "twin," and Didymus is the Greek word for "twin."<sup>1</sup> So, a literal English translation of the text would be a redundant, "Twin, called Twin." It's possible Thomas wasn't even a real name at the time; some linguists argue it was just a nick-name that evolved into an actual name, perhaps as late as the middle ages. In any case, though, it would seem this disciple must have had a sibling. I've always found it interesting we don't know anything about the other twin. Was it a twin brother? A twin sister? An identical twin? We don't know. None of the Gospels tell us anything of a sibling. In early church history one sect actually thought Thomas was Jesus' twin brother ... which would certainly change our nativity scenes as we would have to have two babies in the manger! One early church tradition held that he was called "the Twin" because he had a remarkable physical resemblance to Jesus; so, the other disciples called him "the Twin" because he looked like Jesus. Again, we don't know. We do know Thomas has been better known throughout church history, and somewhat derisively so, as the cynical Doubting Thomas, (*or as the Patron Saint of Those Who Are The Last To Know*). As I've mentioned when we've looked at this passage before, I think Thomas is worthy of our imitation, not our derision. If anything, maybe **we** should try to be Thomas' unnamed twin, in that we should strive to resemble this determined disciple who insisted on experiencing the risen Jesus for himself ... genuine doubt, properly exercised, can be a good thing.

There is a disingenuous doubt that really doesn't want answers; it just likes creating and asking endless questions. This is a doubt that at times won't even acknowledge what it knows to be true ... because to do so may have implications for the way one lives his/her life. This disingenuous doubt is really just unbelief in a different guise; it is a refusal to believe. As one person summed it up: "Doubt is *can't* believe; unbelief is *won't* believe. Doubt is honesty; unbelief is obstinacy. Doubt is looking for light; unbelief is quite content with darkness." The *good* type of doubt wants answers, it wants clarification, it wants to believe! Genuine doubt wants to "doubt doubt;" it doesn't want to persist in doubt just for doubts' sake. In short, believing doubt doubts doubt! (*say THAT five times real fast!*)

One story illustrating "doubting doubt" is from Scottish novelist and author Robert Louis Stevenson. He grew up in a strict Calvinistic Presbyterian home; his maternal grandfather was a pastor. When Stevenson left home as a young adult, he also left his faith; adopting by his own admission a rather bohemian lifestyle and calling himself a "youthful atheist." He once wrote, "[Religious] respectability is the deadliest gag and wet blanket that can be laid on a man." However, when he turned forty, Stevenson began to, in his words, "... have doubt about my doubts." He eventually re-embraced the Christian faith in which he was raised (*at age 42 writing, "There is a God who is manifest for those who care to look*

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<sup>1</sup> The name *Thomas* (Greek: Θωμάς) is derived from the Aramaic or Classical Syriac: ܛܘܡܐ *Toma*, equivalently from Hebrew *Teom*, meaning "twin". The equivalent term for twin in Greek, which is also used in the New Testament, is Δίδυμος *Didymus*. From [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas\\_the\\_Apostle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_the_Apostle)

for Him.”), and at the year of his death (*he passed away at the age of 44*) he was a man who possessed, again in his words, a “cast iron faith.”<sup>2</sup> Genuine doubt can be a vehicle that will drive us to eventually discover and encounter truth; in fact, it can and will eventually take us to the One Who is the Truth. Thomas displays this healthy kind of doubt.

Let’s take a quick look again at this familiar story. On the night of that first Easter Sunday, the disciples are gathered together behind locked doors, and the risen Jesus appears to them (*and allow me to make the related pastoral observation that, of course, the risen Jesus is often present where His disciples are gathered together in His name, especially on Sunday!*) Seeing and experiencing Jesus in their midst, their doubts dissipate, they are overjoyed, they are energized by Jesus’ living presence, they are motivated by His word and they are empowered by His Spirit (*and allow me to make the pastoral observation that, of course, that’s what often happens when the living Jesus visits His disciples gathered together in His name on Sunday! As we talked about last week, we always experience more of Jesus when we engage Him in the community and company of others who identify as His disciples!*) Jesus appeared to the disciples in that closed room, showed them His hands and side, they were overjoyed to see Him, but as noted in verse 24, “Thomas, called Didymus, one of the twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came.” I can imagine the disciples saying, “That Thomas ... boy, *Did-he-miss* it this time!” We don’t know where Thomas was, any more than we know where all the approximately 60% of our church’s members who are not here on a typical Sunday morning are! All we know is Thomas was absent. And he **missed out**; he missed something very special because he wasn’t gathered with the other disciples that Sunday.

Now, I’m sure disciples who miss such gatherings often have valid reasons. For Thomas, most likely he just wanted to be alone; we know he was a passionate man who probably felt things intensely, and often those in intense grief do want to be alone ... and that is not a bad thing in and of itself. That’s understandable. But trust me on this ... it is not good to stay alone too long. There’s a sermon in itself here, but it is never good to keep on neglecting the fellowship of other disciples. Thomas missed “church” that Sunday, and as a direct result, his despondency deepened, his doubts probably grew and his despair increased ... because he missed the doubt-dispelling, despair-destroying, faith-exhilarating blessing the other disciples received from the living Jesus’ invigorating visit when they gathered together that Sunday.

When the other disciples told him, “Thomas, we saw Him! Right there with us last Sunday! We saw the Risen Lord!” Thomas replied, “Unless I see the nail marks in His hands and put my fingers where the nails were, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe it.” Some have seen Thomas’ response as cynical and even obstinate, but I don’t think so. I believe Thomas refused to be *personally* satisfied with the Christ *his friends* experienced. Imagine Thomas saying, “I am not going to be satisfied with your second-hand information! I haven’t seen Him, and I want to see Him, and I need to see Him in such a way that I want to touch His hands and feet and side myself!” He was not satisfied to live on the “faith experience” of others. And that’s good! That is worthy of our emulation. Don’t be satisfied with your parents’ or grandparents’ experience of Jesus Christ, don’t be satisfied with your pastor’s experience of Jesus Christ, don’t be content to live with your wife’s, your husband’s, your child’s, your friends’ or anyone else’s experience of Jesus Christ ... experience the Living Jesus Christ for yourself, and don’t be satisfied until you do! As the angel told us last week, “He is risen, and He told me to tell you He’s gone ahead of you to Galilee, that place right where you live, and He promised to meet you there!”

And we know Thomas got his request granted. On the Sunday after Easter Thomas is now with the disciples, and this time he does indeed encounter the living Lord for himself. Jesus came to him and showed His hands, His side, and said, “Stop doubting and believe.” Jesus’ words to Thomas, “Stop doubting and believe,” can be translated, “Thomas, stop being an unbeliever and become a believer.” In other words, “Thomas, stop acting like an unbeliever, stop thinking I am dead and gone. Become a believer and live accordingly!” And Thomas responded by saying, “My Lord and my God.” Which, by the way, is a remarkable, even incredible, confession for a monotheistic Jew ... to call another human being “my God.” He actually applied to Jesus *two* titles of deity, for he recognized in Jesus God in the flesh, and he recognized in Jesus his divine Lord, the Lord of Life Who had conquered death.

Interestingly, we are not told Thomas actually needed to follow through and poke his hands and fingers in the holes. I don’t want to read too much into this, but perhaps that’s intentional. Perhaps John is intimating the personal encounter with Jesus was enough, enough for Thomas to respond, “My Lord and my God.” No further proof was needed or desired ... for it is in worshipful encounter with the Risen Christ in the company of other disciples that our fears and doubts tend to dissipate and we begin to doubt our doubts. Doubts and fears will never totally disappear this side of heaven, but they do tend to be put in their proper perspective as we personally encounter the living Jesus Christ.

Yes, believing is seeing. It is in believing that we really begin to see. And believing in the Risen Christ will change how we see everything.

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.wadeburlison.org/2015/02/doubts-about-doubt-katy-perrys-reality.html> (ed. note ... I can’t independently verify all these details regarding Robert Louis Stevenson from other independent sources, but I can with many of them!)