

**Let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.**

**John 20:24-29, NRSV**

<sup>24</sup>But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup>So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “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.”

<sup>26</sup>A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” <sup>27</sup>Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” <sup>28</sup>Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” <sup>29</sup>Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

I've always found it a little difficult to believe good news. I wish it weren't so, but it is what it is. Maybe it's my personal history, or maybe it's the way I was designed, but I have come to the conclusion that if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is. So, as you can imagine, I feel a certain kinship with Thomas.

Most of you have probably heard Thomas referred to as “Doubting Thomas,” which honestly is a little unfair. However, if we look at what we can learn about Thomas from the gospel accounts, he probably more accurately described as melancholy Thomas. Cautious Thomas. Loyal Thomas. Whether this was a result of his inborn personality or the effects of life events, one could only speculate.

The first words we hear from Thomas in the gospels come when Jesus wants to return to Bethany to heal Lazarus. By this in the timeline, it is already not safe for Jesus in that region. The disciples discourage Jesus, mentioning that his opposition wants to stone him. But Thomas said to the other disciples, “Let us go too so that we may die with Jesus.” These are not the words of a skeptic, but the words of a devoted friend and follower who would follow his teacher even if it meant death. Thomas, upon hearing that Jesus wanted to return to the place where he was wanted dead more than alive, could see no possible future except one where Jesus ended up stoned, and was ready to go down with him.

I, too, have a tendency to leap to the worst possible conclusion. Husband late coming home? I'm already mentally making a plan for who to call and what hymns need singing at the funeral. Child falls headfirst out of the swing? I'm absolutely preparing for a broken neck. Listen, my kids already know that it is literally a rule in our house to not make noises on purpose that sound like someone is choking or dying. Mom will descend; Mom will ruin the fun. Call me a pessimist, I guess, but I'm expecting the worst. I'm nearly always prepared for the worst news; I've lived it a thousand times already in my mind. It's good news that catches me off-guard.

Much has been made of the fact that Thomas wasn't with the other disciples when Jesus first appeared to them. Verse 19 tells us that they were still behind closed doors because they were afraid of the authorities, and

understandably so. To be perfectly honest, if one of my closest friends had recently been tortured and executed, I might not be with a big group of friends, either. Everyone handles grief differently. I have personally been accused of turning into a hermit when I have been dealing with loss, so I guess if I were Thomas, I would have missed out, too.

When the other disciples told Thomas that they had seen the risen Lord, it was just too good to be true. First of all, how many times did they prank each other for him to not believe them? Like, who hurt you, Thomas? Who lied to you? But let's be fair. The other disciples didn't believe when they were first told, either, but they don't get called "doubting disciples" by anyone but the Lord himself. Let's hear what Luke has to say about it:

### **Luke 24: 9-11, 22-24 CEB**

<sup>9</sup>When they returned from the tomb, they reported all these things to the eleven and all the others. <sup>10</sup>It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles. <sup>11</sup>Their words struck the apostles as nonsense, and they didn't believe the women.

<sup>22</sup>But there's more: Some women from our group have left us stunned. They went to the tomb early this morning <sup>23</sup> and didn't find his body. They came to us saying that they had even seen a vision of angels who told them he is alive. <sup>24</sup>Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found things just as the women said. They didn't see him."<sup>25</sup>Then Jesus said to them, "You foolish people! Your dull minds keep you from believing all the prophets talked about."

So it seems that good news like this is hard for everyone to believe when they hear it second-hand. Yes, they have seen Jesus resurrect the dead, on multiple occasions, but to resurrect himself? And besides, when they saw Jesus walking on water, they themselves had thought it was a ghost. Was it really such a stretch when Thomas to politely decline to believe that they really did see what they thought they saw. It was just too wonderful to be true. A ghost maybe. A hallucination. Wishful thinking. The kind of thing you'd need to see to believe.

This is pretty common human behavior, frankly. What's that old song, "Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me"?

And how many of us live in this space ourselves, this space in between the resurrection and recognition? Sure, we hear the message that God loves us, individually, unconditionally, passionately, as his very own children, but do we believe it? Or do we, in our deepest heart, suspect that it is too good to be true?

Jesus has such compassion on Thomas. He comes directly to him behind those locked doors, just as he had with the others, but he looks straight at Thomas and speaks directly into his doubt: look at me, touch me, feel my wounds. And Thomas doesn't even need to put his hand into those wounds because Jesus told him exactly the words his heart needed to hear. It's okay to believe that I'm really here. There is no trick. You aren't just fooling yourself, Thomas, and no one is lying to you. When Jesus replies to him, we hear those words that have

echoed throughout history: “Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe.” Because we know those words mean us.

And what about us? And what about me? And what about you?

Friends, let me share with you a passage that has brought me comfort and hope for many years. It’s tucked away, near the back of your bible, in 2 Peter.

## **2 Peter 1:16, 19-21, CEB**

<sup>16</sup>We didn't repeat crafty myths when we told you about the powerful coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Quite the contrary, we witnessed his majesty with our own eyes.

<sup>19</sup>In addition, we have a most reliable prophetic word, and you would do well to pay attention to it, just as you would to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

<sup>20</sup>Most important, you must know that no prophecy of scripture represents the prophet’s own understanding of things, <sup>21</sup>because no prophecy ever came by human will. Instead, men and women lead by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

Listen, it’s normal to quietly question. Scripture is filled with a rich history of the children of Israel questioning God, sometimes to the very whirlwind of his voice. Thomas was no exception, and neither are you nor I.

This might be the end of Thomas’s influence as it pertains to the gospels themselves, but church history has this insight for us. See, after Pentecost, when the fire of the Holy Spirit came down and the disciples dispersed throughout the east to spread this good news, the Apostles Thomas and Bartholomew eventually ended up in India where, according to the people of the Saint Thomas Christian tradition, Thomas established and physically helped build at least seven churches. He is considered the patron saint of India and was ultimately martyred there. But truly, blessed were many, nearly 3000 miles from Jerusalem, who had not seen the risen Christ, yet believed because of Thomas. The intellectualism that prevented him from trusting his friends when they shared the good news with him is what he was known for, and the way by which he shared Christ with others.

The compassion that Christ has on Thomas is the same compassion that we receive for ourselves. What would your life look like if you really, really believed that the Creator of the Universe delighted in you? You, as you are. You, with your quirks and your habits and even your disabilities. You, with your skepticisms, your doubts, and the quiet nagging of your anxiety in the dark. What would you do if you felt, to the bottom of your heart, that you were made on purpose by a God who loves you? How would you treat your neighbor if you believed without restriction that the bottomless, immeasurable love of God was living in you and waiting to be poured out? How would you sleep at night if you fully rested in the knowledge that, as the Psalms say, your failures have been scattered as far as east is from the west, at the bottom of the ocean, washed clean, not even attributed to your account, and most importantly, not even remembered?

What if? That’s the rub, the question that tortures so many of us. What if, in the end, I’m not really loved? What if God really is who He says He is? What if He really meant it? And what if we lived like it were true?