

The incredulity of Thomas

An Easter sermon on John 20:19–31

Kathy McCamis

Doubting Thomas

Most of us associate Thomas with the unfortunate label *Doubting Thomas*.¹ Poor Thomas has been saddled with that nickname for centuries, thanks in large part to the story in John 20:19–31, in which he tells his fellow

disciples that he will not believe their stories of having seen the Lord unless he sees the scars for himself.

Frankly, I'm not sure that was an unreasonable request, and I think it is time that we free Thomas from this label once and for all. A sixteenth-century English manuscript includes an image entitled "The incredulity of Thomas."² The *Cambridge English Dictionary* describes incredulity as "the feeling of . . . not being able to believe something."³ If that is the case, who among us cannot relate

to experiencing some incredulity at the idea of resurrection—real, live, in the flesh, man-who-was-crucified-is-back-and-they-claim-they-saw-him resurrection?

I find myself somewhat surreptitiously siding with Thomas on this one. I do not believe easily, however much I might wish I did. I am cautious. I want to weigh the evidence for myself, rather than simply taking

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1 This sermon was first preached at Bethel Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, Manitoba, on the second Sunday of Easter, April 24, 2022.

2 The image referenced here can be viewed at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doubting_Thomas#/media/File:The_incredulity_of_Thomas,_who_places_his_finger_in_the_wound_\(f._142v\)_Cropped.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doubting_Thomas#/media/File:The_incredulity_of_Thomas,_who_places_his_finger_in_the_wound_(f._142v)_Cropped.jpg).

3 *Cambridge English Dictionary*, s.v., "incredulity"; online: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/incredulity>.

someone else's word for it. I came to my Christian faith after carefully examining the evidence before me, after needing to find for myself a reason to commit my life to wholehearted faith.

And we come to these stories of resurrection having experienced plenty of challenges that give us abundant reason to question this theology of



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life beyond death. COVID-19 has meant that in recent years we have been unable to gather as a community on Easter morning because of a pandemic that has brought so much suffering with it.

Beyond that, we are continuously aware of the horrors of the war in Ukraine and of wars that rage no less awfully in other places in the world at the periphery of our awareness and of

our longing for peace. We have experienced grief at the unexpected loss of people dear to us. We have borne witness to the painful legacy of Indian Residential Schools in Canada. We see the impacts of human activity on our planet and feel helpless to turn things around.

We might be forgiven if we want to ask—with Thomas—for a little proof that God is yet with us in the midst of our fears and uncertainties. And yet, none of us probably wants to be known as the Doubting Thomas of our own community.

That alone seems to be a good reason to relieve Thomas of his terrible nickname, once and for all! Because it is time to relieve ourselves of this unnecessary burden: believing that doubts and questions are the unwanted enemies of the life of faith and that there is no place for them in the lives of “good Christians.”

To that, I say, *Baloney!*

Faithful Thomas

Anne Lamott writes, “The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns.”⁴ Which, if you think about it, is pretty much exactly what Thomas did.

4 Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Riverhead, 2005), 256–57.

And when Jesus came and met Thomas where he was at and offered him the same encounter that the other disciples had already experienced, the result was Thomas's words, "My Lord and my God!" The power of this confession of faith is easily missed in our contemporary Christian context, two millennia later, when our theology has developed to the point where both Lord and God are regular parts of our worship lexicon. But with these words, Thomas takes the most common titles used of God, *Yahweh* and *Elohim*, and applies them to Jesus.⁵ Doubting Thomas? I hardly think so. It is Thomas to whom is credited the highest affirmation in

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the entire Gospel of John. It is Thomas who gets it, Thomas who provides the example of trust and faith. Thomas.

So let us free Thomas, and in doing so, free ourselves too.

Thomas is an interesting character, known to us in Scripture primarily through John's Gospel, although he is named as one of the Twelve in the Synoptic Gospels as well. We first encounter Thomas in John 11:16. Mary and Martha have sent word to Jesus to let him

know that his friend Lazarus is gravely ill. After staying where he is for two days upon receiving this news, Jesus proposes going to Judea. His disciples, however, are concerned: "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and you are going there again?" (John 11:8)⁶

After some characteristically Johannine musings in which Jesus succeeds in confusing everyone with him about whether Lazarus is truly dead or is merely sleeping, it is Thomas who speaks for the group when it becomes clear that Jesus cannot be deterred from going to be with Lazarus and the sisters, despite the dangers that presents: "Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him'" (11:16). Brave and loyal, a leader among the disciples—that is how we first meet Thomas.

Thomas next appears in John 14. Here Jesus says, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told

5 Willard M. Swartley, *John*, Believer's Church Bible Commentary (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2013), 464.

6 Scripture quotations are from the NRSV.

you that I go to prepare a place for you?” Again, it is Thomas who is brave enough to speak aloud the thoughts that surely the others are having as well: “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” (14:5). Thomas is honest and willing to be a little vulnerable about his lack of understanding. Yet he demonstrates that he intends to follow and wants to know the way. Faithful to Jesus—that is Thomas.

And Jesus responds to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. . . . If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on, you do know him and have seen him” (14:6-7). I wonder if those words come back to Thomas, as he stands face to face with the risen Christ—if they lie behind his astounding statement of faith in John 20.

We do not know why Thomas is not with the disciples on that first day of the week, when Jesus appears to them in the locked room and shows them his hands and his side. But when they tell him about these

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unlikeliest of events—truly the definition of *unprecedented* (a word many of us have come to rue these last couple of years)—Thomas is skeptical, as we might well have been also.

For many of us, these resurrection stories have been part of our lives from our earliest days and are now so familiar that they lose some of their shock value. So let me remind us all: Jesus was well and truly dead. Crucified. One does not bounce back from crucifixion. When a Roman soldier pierces one’s side, and

blood and water come pouring out, that is the end. Pronounced dead. Wrapped in linens and laid to rest in a tomb. Gone.

And if there are only two things certain in this life, according to Benjamin Franklin, this certainly was one of them: death! So, when one’s friends appear to have had a mass hallucination involving the dead friend reappearing, it is only natural that one is not sure quite what to think or feel—whether one needs to seek grief counseling for those friends or ask what they had been eating and drinking at the time.

To his credit, Thomas does not immediately call them crazy or explain to them that this is truly impossible. He simply says that he will need to see for himself in order to believe. A week later, that is exactly what happens. The events closely parallel the initial experience of the disciples.

Locked room, sudden appearance of Jesus, same greeting of “Peace be with you!” (I can imagine that when Jesus is suddenly standing in a room with you, peace might well be the first thing needed!) And, just as he had with the other disciples, Jesus shows Thomas his hands and his side, even offering to let Thomas touch the wounds.

“Do not doubt but believe,” Jesus says (20:27). (Do you think that Jesus wishes he had chosen his words differently now that this is all his friend Thomas is remembered for by so many people?)

The word “believe” comes from the Greek *pisteuo*, meaning both to believe something is true and also to trust or to rely on. Belief here is not a one-time, absolute assent but a relational virtue that can be nurtured

and grown.⁷ Thomas’s declaration, “My Lord and my God!” puts the exclamation mark on his example of belief, of trust in Jesus.

“These things,” we are told, “are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (20:31). Life.

The same word, *zoe*, brings us full circle back to the beginning of John’s Gospel, to the reminder we hear at Christmas every year: “In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it” (1:4-5). And we, like Thomas, are invited to place our trust in the risen Christ, in whom is life that brings light to all people.

That is essentially it for Thomas’s story in the New Testament, but traditional accounts have it that Thomas went on to preach the gospel as far afield as southern India, where to this day he is thought of as the patron saint of India among Christian adherents there.

Beloved Thomas

One scholar, James Charlesworth, has written a book making a case for the argument that Thomas and the mysterious “Beloved Disciple” in

7 René Such Schreiner, “Commentary on John 20:19-31,” *Working Preacher*, online: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-easter-3/commentary-on-john-2019-31-18>.



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John's Gospel are one and the same.⁸ It is an intriguing theory, even if it is not a view widely accepted by biblical scholars. But it made me stop and wonder: How much of our reading of the story of Doubting Thomas reflects our own feelings of shame? How much might we be imposing on Thomas and on this text the impacts of a church that has too often insisted on the merits of blind faith, of right belief not as trust to nurture and to grow but as once-and-for-all assent to right doctrine?

In a recent issue of *Anabaptist World*, I read the story of a provincial church conference asking its pastors and church leaders to recommit to the denomination's Confession of Faith. This seems to be a response to an increasing number of congregations and church members wanting to engage in study and discernment around the welcome and inclusion of LGBTQ people in their churches. Stories like this—stories in which people's genuine questions and desire for conversation are met instead with requests for "theological compliance"—are far too common.⁹

I wonder how much it is stories like this that have contributed to Thomas getting such a bad rap—how much they have contributed to a culture in which we too often fear giving voice to our questions or explor-

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ing our reasons for having faith (or not). When our questions are met with insistence that we repent and renew our commitment to right belief, maybe it is no wonder that Thomas is viewed in such a negative light by so many in the church.

I wonder what might happen if we dared to flip the narrative, to listen to the voice of Jesus who never once condemns Thomas nor scolds him for his desire to see for himself but instead commends his faith for all of us to emulate. Such a reading, just maybe, might invite

us instead to dare to shed the negative labels we have received, from ourselves or others, and instead to hear ourselves named as no less than Beloved Disciples.

8 See James H. Charlesworth, *The Beloved Disciple: Whose Witness Validates the Gospel of John?* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995).

9 John Longhurst, "British Columbia MB pastors question request to reaffirm Confession of Faith," *Anabaptist World*, December 24, 2021, 22.

Walking in the resurrection is not about perfect certainty, about having all the right answers and being free of all doubt. It is about a journey in which we learn to put our trust in Jesus, in whom truly is life, the light of all people.

You are nothing less than God's beloved children, one and all. So let the story of Thomas invite you to follow his example of bold honesty, faithful loyalty, and courageous discipleship, this week and always. Amen.

About the author

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