

Thomas, A Doubter?

St. Mark Lutheran
Three services

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Today we continue our messages based on the series "Walking with Those Who Walked with Jesus" by the Rev. Richard Pfeil. This is message number four in a six disciple series.

We have a "Quickie Quiz" of six questions at the start of each message. We have made it into a sort of contest as you earn points with a correct answer. Write down what you earn on your service folder so you don't lose track of your points.

Here we go with question # 1 worth five points: Is the Apostle Thomas mentioned in one Gospel, two Gospels, three Gospels, or all four Gospels? Choose an answer. The correct ANSWER is: all four Gospels. Mark down any points earned. Here is question #2 worth ten points: Thomas was sometimes called ""Didymus". Did that mean "the beloved"; "the twin"; "the courageous one"; or "the doubter"? The correct ANSWER is "the twin". Here is question #3 worth fifteen points: According to tradition, Thomas eventually died in which country: India, Persia, Israel, or Italy? The correct ANSWER is India. Question #4 is worth twenty points: An interesting document was found in a jar near Cairo, Egypt, in 1945, which is often referred to as the Gospel of Thomas. The collection is dated: 25 B.C.; A.D. 100; A.D. 140, or A.D. 195? The correct ANSWER is A.D. 140. Question #5 is worth twenty-five points: In Chapter 11 Jesus says he is going back to attend to Lazarus, who has been very sick. The disciples, knowing that this place was very close to Jerusalem, warn Jesus not to go because the Jews in Jerusalem nearby want to kill him. How did Thomas reply to this: "Let us also go, that we might die with him"; "We could go under cover of the night"; "It is best that you not go"; or "He will be safer if we all go". The ANSWER is "Let us also go, that we might die with him." The final question is worth thirty points. Thomas asked for two forms of proof before he would believe that Jesus had risen from the dead. One was that Thomas would have to see the nail marks. What was the other form of proof? The ANSWER is that he would have to in some way touch the marks or wounds of Christ.

Today I am taking the position as the attorney for the defense. Who am I defending? Well, Thomas, of course. He has had the name of "doubting Thomas" passed down for a couple of thousand years. Let's look to see if this is really fair to him and what kind of a person he really was.

Now John 20 tells us that on the first day of the week the disciples were together with the doors locked for fear of the Jews. Thomas was not among them. And Jesus came and stood among them and said "Peace be with you!" He showed them his hands and side. We can all certainly understand that the disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord!

Have you ever had great news or fantastic news that you could not wait to tell someone? The disciples searched for Thomas and I feel sure they couldn't wait to tell him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But what he said to them must have really seemed like a downer. Thomas said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."

A week later the disciples were in the house again. This time Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came again and stood among them. He said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Stop doubting and believe."

Then Thomas finally believed. He replied, "My Lord and my God!"

Jesus said, "Because you have seen me you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (John 20:29)

Put yourself in Thomas's place. Pretend that someone near and dear to you has died, and you are grief-stricken. Some of your friends come up to you and tell you that they have seen the person. Do you believe that without evidence? I don't believe most people would. I am certain I would not without further evidence.

There is every indication in the Holy Scriptures that Thomas was a deeply committed and loving disciple. He had to be heart-sick over losing Christ. Many times there have been mistakes made in identifying other people. Thomas is not going to grab on to some possible false hope just to be crushed again.

Here is what I really like. Jesus doesn't condemn Thomas. He shows up again to bring Thomas the reassurance that he needs. In his love and grace our Lord even meets Thomas' terms. He invites him to come and see and to touch his wounds. Thomas' faith is strengthened through all this and he pronounces Jesus to be who He is, his Lord and his God.

I think God gives us the same opportunity. It is not easy to believe in what you have not seen. But with God anything is possible, and that's the challenge that we have in this time in history. We sow the seed; He is the one who causes it to grow. We need to be gracious and show love and patience. Not everyone comes to trust in the Lord the first or second time they hear the message.

Let me share an example with you. I was a baseball manager for 13-15 year old boys for about eight years. I got to know some of the families well, and I eventually found out where they went to church and whether they believed in the Lord. I spent a lot of time explaining the key points of Christianity to them. The mother of one of my players always seemed very interested. But one day she stunned me by thanking me for caring for them, but told me she really did not believe a number of the things I had shared from the Bible. I was quite disappointed, but I accepted it.

Eventually her son grew too old for our team, and there were other players and families that joined the team, and I did not see that family them any more.

A couple of years later I was shopping at Rogers(it's called Giant Eagle now), and I almost ran into her with my shopping cart while turning into the next aisle. "Ken," she said. "I have been meaning to call you. I wanted to tell you that I believe the same things in the Bible that you do now." This surprise announcement turned out to be super important. About a year later, this young mom unexpectedly died. What she lost on this earth was more than made up for when she met her Savior in heaven.

In John, chapter 11, we see something else in Thomas' life that really stands out. He was a devoted and courageous disciple. Jesus was a close friend of a man named Lazarus and his two sisters, Martha and Mary. The sisters sent word to Jesus that Lazarus was sick and dying. Jesus decided to go back to Bethany where Lazarus was. But Bethany was just about two miles from Jerusalem, and the disciples were against it. They reminded Jesus that the last time he was in this area the Jews tried to stone him to death. But Jesus was determined to go and serve God there, and what did Thomas say to the disciples? He said, "Let us also go, that we might die with him." (John 11:16)

Wow! That is courage. Do you have that type of courage? Is your walk with Christ so strong that you would rather die with him than live without him? If you are not there yet, it does not mean that you are not a Christian, but it does mean that you have some growing to do. How do we grow to be strong like Thomas? It involves times of worship and study. It means taking Holy Communion seriously. It means having Jesus as the priority in your life. We get that kind of strength through a close relationship with the Lord. To me, "Doubting Thomas" is not a fair description of this man. I prefer to think of him as "Courageous Thomas". And let us not forget that Jesus made a special effort to help Thomas believe, and that is our responsibility toward other people also.

We close today with two interesting things about the life of Thomas. The sources are outside of the Bible but still worth our attention. There is a document that was discovered in A.D. 140 in a jar close to Cairo, Egypt. It is often referred to as the "Gospel of Thomas". The document is a collection of one hundred fourteen reported sayings of Christ in the form of isolated dicta or brief conversations. But the late dating of the document, along with the fact that some of the sayings seem to have been altered from previous teachings, argue against accepting this as the Word of God. Thomas may have been the original author of some of it, however.

Second, there are accounts that Thomas even traveled to India. According to these sources, he was martyred there by a spear in an attack. There is even a Christian group in India today which claims to be the spiritual descendents of Thomas. The records of a Jewish community not far from them backs up what they say.

Whatever one may believe about the last two claims, I am pretty sure that we can all agree on this: that through this courageous apostle many people came to know the true God and our Savior Jesus Christ. On this Trinity Sunday, we pray that God the Holy Spirit would raise up more people like Thomas to help lead Christ's Church today. Amen.

