

ONE VOTE FOR THOMAS

John 20:19-31

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I will say from the start that ol' Thomas is one of my favorite Bible characters... and I think he gets a bum rap. I don't think he gets it from John, who wrote the gospel, but I do think the church over the years has been awfully hard on Thomas. Doubting Thomas, we've called him. Don't be like Doubting Thomas, I was told as a child. Thomas didn't know how to trust God, they said. Don't be like him. Don't doubt. The message that came through to me was, don't ask questions! Don't second-guess the gospel. Take everything at face value.

And frankly, that put me into a conflict within my own family. My mother, some of you have heard me say, was as thoughtful and generous and faithful a Christian woman as I have ever known. Not perfect, mind you, but faithful. And she took things at face value. Her piety was simple and earnest and trusting. My father, on the other hand, was a devout skeptic. He had soured on the church years before I was born, and he was skeptical of anyone whose faith seemed, at least to him, unreasonable. I have never understood what it was those two people saw in each other, but ... well, that's another story. This story is that I grew up learning something of a healthy balance between faith and skepticism. From my mother I learned the 23rd Psalm and the Beatitudes and heard many of the great stories of the Bible. From my father I learned the value of asking questions and of avoiding simplistic answers to complex mysteries. There's enough of my mother in me to lead me to claim the Biblical stories as integral to my story, to find in the Gospels eternal truth. There's enough of my father in me to find folks like Thomas faithful in their questions.

New Testament scholar Richard Hays sympathetically understands Thomas as the voice of "critical reason" among the disciples, a voice that brought some balance to their dreams all through the Gospel of John. He says:

When Jesus ... insisted on going back to Judea to be with the family of his friend Lazarus, who had just died, Thomas tried to talk him out of it. Last time Jesus had been in Judea, they tried to stone him. How could [Jesus] be so perceptive in so many ways and still walk into an open trap? When it became clear that Jesus was determined to go, Thomas decided to go along, but he was politically savvy enough to fear the worst. "Well, all right, let's go along," he said to the others, "so that we may die with him." Thomas was loyal, but he had his eyes open.

In his final days, Jesus had tried to reassure his followers: "I go to prepare a place for you... And you know the way I am going." Thomas wanted to believe, but this sounded like wispy cloud talk. At last he had blurted out, "Look, we don't know where you are going! How can we know the way?"

The other disciples were exasperatingly accepting of everything that Jesus said. Make no mistake, Thomas loved them, thought the cause was a good one: Jesus was the kind of visionary leader that Israel needed. But still, somebody had to keep his feet on the ground. The whole band was in danger all the time of crossing over the thin line that separates faith from fanaticism.

[So, after the dream had crashed at Golgotha, Thomas went into hiding for a while. When he did emerge, he] found out that [the others] were deep into the denial phase of the grief process, claiming that Jesus was alive, that he had appeared to them, blessed them and commissioned them to carry on. That was more than Thomas could swallow. Maybe it had been a hoax, some imposter claiming to be Jesus. Or maybe mass hysteria of some kind, a projection of pious wishes. Thomas was not about to get caught up in [such] fantasy.¹

That's when Thomas stated the conditions of his acceptance of the news. Thomas is plainspoken and gutsy, says poet Amy Hunter – he's "the show-me disciple." He wants to understand what is going on and be able to face the situation at hand. Thomas wants proof. He wants Jesus. When Jesus does appear to his disciples again, Thomas is right there. Far from rebuking Thomas, Jesus offers to meet his conditions. He says, "Put your fingers in my hands, and touch my side." Thomas didn't seem to do so, according to John. The personal encounter made Jesus' resurrection real to him.²

Those who think that John tries to portray Thomas as less than faithful miss the reverent words that follow his encounter with Jesus, for John remembers Thomas saying in response, "My Lord and my God!" It is, says Hunter, "the high point of John's Gospel. When Thomas gets it, he *gets* it. No one else has offered such devotion or named Jesus as God. Thomas holds out for an experience of Jesus on his own terms until he finds his terms made foolish by the reality of seeing Jesus. Only then does he make his statement of faith."³ But it *is* faith.

Mary can't experience the resurrected Jesus for the disciples, and the disciples can't experience Jesus for Thomas. It is *faith, not doubt* that holds out for one's own experience of Jesus.

[Says Hunter] Five years ago I had emergency surgery. My sister, a professor with final exams to give, was getting married in less than a week. Yet she drove from New York City to Massachusetts in a snowstorm to see me in the hospital. No phone call would reassure her that I was alive. She had to see me with her own eyes. Sometimes the demand to see is not doubt [she said]. Sometimes it is even love.⁴

¹ Richard B. Hays, "Fingering the Evidence," *The Christian Century*, in a copy that does not include the exact date of the article, shared with me by Richard Hays.

² Amy B. Hunter, "The Show-me Disciple," *The Christian Century*, March 13-20, 2002, 17.

³ Hunter.

⁴ Hunter, italics mine.

So, let me cast a vote today for Thomas and his love for Jesus. Beyond the caricature he has become in the church's teaching, Thomas' way of coming to faith is every bit as valid and faithful as any of the other ways one might find faith. There are other ways, of course, and John's Gospel portrays those other ways as well. But for the absent Thomas, neither the word of witness nor sight of Jesus would be sufficient, he said. His faith required physical contact. Says Fred Craddock:

The spectrum of faith in the risen Lord is now complete; the beloved disciple alone has that ideal faith which needs no proof; Mary Magdalene believes in response to a word, the disciples *see* and believe, while Thomas must touch in order to trust. Whether Thomas actually touched Jesus is not clear, but what is clear is that faith is not for all the same experience, neither is it generated for all with the same kind and degree of "evidence."

For some, faith is born and grows up as quietly as a child sleeping on grandmother's lap. For others, faith is a lifetime of wrestling with the angel. Some cannot remember when they did not believe, while others cannot remember anything else, their lives having been shattered and reshaped by the decision of faith.

Given these varieties of faith experiences, it is most important to observe that not one of the four [ways] is made normative for everyone. What [John] does insist on is that the possibility of faith is not limited to that circle of original disciples nor to their experiences of Christ. In fact, Christ pronounces a blessing upon all who have not seen and yet who believe. This is to affirm that faith is available to all persons in all places [no matter their] distance [in] time or place from the time and place of Jesus of Nazareth.⁵

Faith, friends, is more a journey than a destination, and it takes each of us down different paths. I don't know that any one path is suitable for another person, much less for all persons. So, I get terribly uncomfortable when I hear anyone describe *the way* one must travel as a faithful person. I think it important to listen to those who have had different experiences of Christ.

One of the voices I have found most helpful across the years has been that of the writer Kathleen Norris, who rediscovered faith in her life in her late thirties.

Faith [she said] is still a surprise to me, as I lived without it for so long. Now I believe that it was merely dormant in the years I was not conscious of its presence. And I have become better at trusting that it is there, even when I can't feel it, or when God seems absent from the world. No small part of my [own] religious conversion has been coming to know that faith is best thought of as a verb, not a "thing" that you either have or you don't. Faith is not discussed as an abstraction in the gospels. Jesus does not talk about it so much as respond to it in

⁵ Fred B. Craddock, *John*, Knox Preaching Guide, Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1982, 142-143. Italics mine.

other people, for example, saying to a woman who has sought him for healing, “your faith has made you whole.” And faith is not presented as a sure thing. Among Jesus’ disciples Peter is the one whose faith is most evident, always eager. Then, in the crisis of Jesus’ arrest and trial, Peter is the disciple who denies him three times....

The relentlessly cheerful and positive language about faith that I associate with the strong-arm tactics of evangelism fails to take this biblical ambiguity into account. I appreciate much more the wisdom of novelist Doris Betts’ assertion that “faith is not synonymous with certainty... [but] is the decision to keep your eyes open.”⁶

That is why I want to cast a vote in behalf of Thomas today: Thomas keeps his eyes, and his options, open until that moment when he comes face to face with Christ. In that moment he not only sees, he responds to the risen Christ and to his claim and calling in his life. “My Lord and my God,” he says. In the end, his story is more than simply a portrait of the movement from unbelief to belief. It is also a story of commissioning. In spite of his skepticism, maybe *because* of it, Thomas grasps that if Jesus really has risen, there is no evading the mission Jesus has left his followers... a mission that might well become dangerous.⁷ What is it that Thomas sees? Well, several things, as Hays notes.

First, Thomas knows that the risen Jesus is not a mirage, but the one who was crucified. God raised Jesus from the dead, but the scars of his wounds remain. Thomas is right in wanting to see the scars. He doesn’t say, “Unless I see his halo, I will not believe.” He asks to see the wounds.

He [understands] that the Christ of faith must be the Jesus who was crucified, dead and buried. Anything less would trivialize the struggle, trivialize the power of evil in the world, trivialize the resurrection. The power of death is conquered – the wounds remain.⁸

The second thing Thomas understands is that this crucified Lord sends us. Jesus says to his disciples, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” That may be part of the reason why Thomas had balked. He saw it and drew his conclusion. If Jesus sends us just as the Father had sent him, what will happen to us? Exactly. Thomas knew we were sent to embody Christ’s love in a world that rejects such love and thus were sent to provoke either faith or opposition. Witnessing to the power of love in the midst of a world engrossed with the love of power is dangerous business. “The world receives lies and death with far greater gladness.”⁹ If you don’t believe it, read the morning paper.

With such understanding, Thomas also sees that encountering Christ is more than just a personal, private thing. From that moment on it becomes a matter of community

⁶ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace*, New York, Riverhead Books, 1998, 169-170.

⁷ Hays; see note 1. The following summary paraphrases his conclusions.

⁸ Hays.

⁹ Hays.

and of telling of his encounter to the world. Unless we are a people whose love leads us to sacrifice for the sake of the world, perhaps even to suffer for that world, unless our love shows how the wounds of suffering are taken up into new life, the world has no reason to believe that Christ's resurrection is anything other than escapist fantasy.¹⁰

I am grateful to Thomas for such lessons. I am grateful for his example of faith, even as I am comfortable with his skepticism, for through his questioning he found faith. But the truth is that in the end, what matters most is not how faith has come to dwell in us. What matters most is that our faith enables us to bear witness to God's wounded, but triumphant love in the midst of this wounded world. Thomas saw it in the end... saw the wounds... saw the mission clearly. And he claimed it as his own. So maybe there's still a chance for skeptics today... even skeptics like us. Maybe.

¹⁰ Hays.