

## **Profound Lessons from Thomas**

### **John 20:19-31**

A defendant was on trial for murder. There was strong evidence indicating his guilt, but there wasn't any corpse. In the closing arguments the defense attorney resorted to a ruse. He told the jury that the person presumed murdered in the case would walk into the courtroom within one minute. He looked toward the courtroom door. The jurors, somewhat stunned, all looked eagerly. A minute passed, then another. Nothing happened. Finally the attorney admitted he made up the story, but pointed out that they all looked with anticipation. He then said that clearly there was reasonable doubt in the case as to whether anyone was killed, and he asked them to return a verdict of guilty. Pretty clever.

The confused jury retired to deliberate. A few minutes later they returned and pronounced the defendant guilty. The defense attorney was beside himself and sought out the jury foreman, asking him how they could have found his client guilty. He said, "You had to have had some doubt. I saw all of you stare at the door waiting for the so-called dead man to enter." The foreman replied, "We looked, yes, but your client did not."

Doubt plays a big role in our lives. We tend to be skeptics when told something outrageous and will doubt until it can be proven true to our satisfaction. That brings us to Thomas. Talk about being told something outrageous. "The Lord is alive and appeared to us," his friends reported to him. That elicited Thomas' classic line, "I'll believe it when I see it."

I like Thomas. Down through the ages I believe he has been unfairly characterized too much as "the doubter." Thomas was real; he was honest; he was open. He called 'em as he saw 'em. I've had my doubts about God at times in my life. Haven't you? And like Thomas I know what it's like to experience Christ and to also believe. I can relate to Thomas. I like him and I'm grateful for him. Here's why:

Thomas gave up everything to follow Jesus, as did all the disciples. In John 11 we read the story of Jesus being told his friend Lazarus was sick. Later Jesus says, "Lazarus is dead...But let us go to him." It is Thomas who then boldly says, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." [11:14-15]. These are hardly the words of a habitual doubter.

Thomas asked questions – thank God! In John 14 Jesus talks about going to his Father's house to prepare a place for them. Jesus says, "You know the way to the place where I am going." [14:4]. Thomas responds openly and honestly, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" [14:5]. His pointed question opens the way for one of Jesus' most penetrating statements about himself: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." [14:6]. We have that spiritual insight from Jesus because Thomas dared to express his doubts and voice his questions.

There cannot be any doubt that Thomas loved Jesus. But Thomas made one mistake, from which we can also learn. At the hour of his great grief at the death of the Master, Thomas separated himself from the Christian fellowship. While all the other disciples were together seeking comfort and encouragement from one another, Thomas was alone somewhere else. Thus, he missed Jesus' first post-resurrection appearance to the disciples. There are times when we need to be alone to sort things out. But one of the great blessings of the Christian community, the family of faith, is a body of people who accept us as we are, who love us, who struggle with us, who empathize with us, and who will nurture and support us in our times of deepest chaos.

While Thomas had human frailties, he also had great human virtues. One of the things I admire the most about Thomas is that he refused to say that he understood something when he clearly did not understand it. He was uncompromisingly honest. Thomas would not quiet his doubts by pretending they did not exist. There is more ultimate faith in the person who insists on being sure than in the person who mindlessly repeats things which they have never thought through, and which they may never really believe. An honest and searching doubt will, in the end, arrive at certainty.

And then when Thomas was sure, he didn't hold anything back. "My Lord and my God," he said. Thomas doubted in order to be sure. When he was sure, then he totally surrendered. When a person has fought through the doubts to arrive at the conviction that Jesus is God, then that person has attained the certainty that a person who unthinkingly accepts can never reach.

If you are getting the idea that I believe it is okay to doubt, you are correct. Not only is it all right, but it is spiritually and theologically healthy to doubt. Theologian Paul Tillich said, "Sometimes I think my mission is to bring faith to the faithless and doubt to the faithful." Tillich didn't like mindless faith. He wanted people to have a well thought out and informed faith. The key to it is the attitude of our doubt. There are two ways to doubt – closed and open. The person who is a closed doubter sits with arms folded across the chest, refusing to listen to the possibilities. That was not Thomas. Samuel Clemens, *a.k.a.* Mark Twain, said, "You can't depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus." The other kind of doubters, the open doubters, are those who honestly voices their questions, but who are willing to acknowledge there may be more to it than meets their current eyes. Thomas doubted, but he was always open to being convinced otherwise.

Be an open doubter, not a closed one. Let me contemporize this. I want a show of hands. How many of you are now, or have ever been a teacher of any kind, whether in the public or private school system, or in Sunday school, or wherever. Now let me ask all of you teachers a question, Do you want students who robotically take in everything you say, never raise their hands, never ask questions, but just sit there and then regurgitate information on exams? Or do you want students who questioningly voice their doubts with an open attitude that says, "Show me how I can prove to myself that what you are saying is true in my world.?" As a teacher I personally would much rather have the latter kind of student and I suspect you would also.

If we remain open, then whatever doubts we may have will eventually find resolution in the deepest part of ourselves. We must continue the search and that search will not always be easy and it may at times be painful. We weren't there with Thomas. Jesus doesn't come to us and invite us to touch his wounds. But he does ask each of us to probe his reality in other ways in our lives. We stay open to those eventualities through worship, meditation, and prayer. Thomas experienced Jesus in his life in one way. We too can experience Jesus in our lives, and we will when we openly tell him we want to do so.

We have focused on the second half of today's passage regarding the doubting of Thomas. As each of us willingly confronts whatever doubts we may have, we need to turn to the first part of the passage. Hold onto Jesus' actions and words in the Upper Room that day: "Peace be with you." [20:21]. "Receive the Holy Spirit." [20:22]. The peace of Christ is always with us and his Holy Spirit is constantly with us. In that we may trust, and it will lead us towards the greater light and the dispelling of our doubts. Thanks be to God. Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 1 May 2011