

“MY LORD AND MY GOD!”

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John 20:19-31

TEXT: *Then [Jesus] said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."*

Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" – John 20:27-28

INTRODUCTION

Waterloo was the famous, decisive battle ending Emperor Napoleon's conquest of most of Europe. England had sent the Duke of Wellington over with an army to join the battle and in June of 1815, the armies met. The English public was waiting breathlessly to hear of the results of what they knew could be the turning point of the war. In that day, light signal was considered the best way to get news quickly across the English Channel, spelling out the message in code. Towers had been built for this purpose at Calais and Dover. On the afternoon of June 15, after Napoleon surrendered, the news was transmitted across the Channel to England. It began, "Wellington defeated..." and then a fog rolled in too thick to see the rest of the message, or even know if there was more of a message. For three hours, the fog persisted so no other message got through. The mood in London was gloomy and devastated. The prime minister and the generals were huddled in an emergency meeting about what to do now. The feeling was, "All is lost. They'd sent their best and been defeated." Then the fog lifted and the rest of the message came through: "Wellington defeated *the enemy!*" The presumed disaster was in fact a great victory. The gloom and moaning in the streets of London was turned to dancing and celebration.

That three hours of fog reminds me of the three days Jesus was in the tomb. On Good Friday, all looked lost. Jesus was dead— murdered by the jealous religious leaders. Evil had triumphed over good. Everyone had given up hope. Then, Easter morning, the fog lifted and Jesus rose from the dead. But everyone didn't get the message and some had trouble believing it. We're going to focus on one of those disciples this morning, Thomas. He stayed in the fog longer than the other ten. But when he came out, his declaration of faith becomes the model for all of us— five words: ***My Lord and my God!*** It forms the climax of this Gospel.

THOMAS

Thomas's name is forever joined with the word "doubt"— "doubting Thomas." But the Bible never refers to him as "doubting Thomas." Yet, in Thomas we find wonderful help for all of us who struggle at times with doubt, for in his honest doubting he blazes a trail to unshakeable faith for all of us. And I hope you do wrestle with doubt, for it is out of the wrestling that true, deep faith can be born. If there is never any doubt, faith can be untested— a frail thing unable to withstand the storms of life.

We don't know much about Thomas. There are only three references to him saying anything, all of them in John's Gospel. In two of these, his name is given with the Greek version, "also called Didymus" a Greek word for "twin." Actually, the Hebrew word from which we get "Thomas" also comes from the root for "twin." So, his identity is clearly bound up in his being a twin. As you would guess there is lots of speculation about who his twin brother might be, but we have no clue from Scripture.

The two references to Thomas prior to this scene introduce us to a man who is solidly in touch with reality. The first time Thomas speaks up is when Jesus has been summoned by Martha and Mary to come to Bethany and heal Lazarus who is near death. In the process of getting the message to Jesus and His delay in going to Bethany, Lazarus has died. This is maybe a week or ten days prior to Jesus' crucifixion. When Jesus announces they are going back to Bethany, which is just a couple of miles from Jerusalem, Thomas says to the other disciples,

"Let us also go, that we may die with him." (John 11:16)

Thomas is clearly in touch with the dangers. Most of the other disciples seem rather clueless most of the time. But not Thomas. He's seen the looks on the faces of the religious leaders, and heard the threat beneath their questions. Peter is not one for thinking things through or picking up on the subtleties of things. He jumps into things, then thrashes his way out of them. James and John are hot-tempered, nick-named "Sons of Thunder," wanting to call down fire on a Samaritan village that rejected Jesus. Also James and John were busy conniving behind the scenes with their mother to be number one and two in the kingdom Jesus would establish. But Thomas knows that going to Jerusalem, or even close, is tantamount to a death sentence. This is not pessimism, it is reality. You have to admire his courage and loyalty. He sees things clearly as they are and is ready to die with Jesus.

Then, the second time Thomas speaks is at the Last Supper in the Upper Room. Jesus is telling them to not be troubled for He's going to heaven to prepare a place for them there. Here, we see the literalism of Thomas's practical mind as he asks the question for which we are all grateful— for Jesus' answer is one of the most wonderful statements in all of Scripture. Here it is:

Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:5-6)

So Thomas is a practical man with an empirical mind. He'd make a good scientist. He thinks things through. He is good at observing and questioning things as they are. There's an honesty in him that won't let him profess or say things he doesn't believe.

MISSING OUT

After the crucifixion, apparently ten of the disciples, and Luke adds, *and those with them* (24:33), continued to meet together. They were huddled together in fear— *with the doors locked for fear of the Jews* (Jn 19:19). Judas of course is not there because he has taken his own life. But Thomas is missing. We aren't told why he is not there, but I think we can make some pretty accurate conjectures.

We often assume he wasn't there because of his doubts. But, while it may have been a factor, remember that he was not alone in doubting. In Jesus' first resurrection appearance to the gathered disciples on Easter, Luke gives some additional words of Jesus, including, *why do doubts arise in your minds?* (24:38). And in addition to showing them his scarred hands and feet, he eats a piece of fish to offer further proof He is real. All the disciples have some doubts they are struggling with. Thomas's problem is he thinks that excludes him from the company of the disciples.

Also, I expect Thomas has isolated himself in his failure. We've seen his professed courage. There is strength here, a rational man, not given to being driven by the emotion of the moment. He's a man of resolve and action. If anyone could stand against the tide, we'd expect it would be Thomas. Yet, at the critical moment he folded. Of course, all the other disciples did as well. They all fled at Jesus' arrest (Mtt. 26:56). But to Thomas that is little comfort. He failed. He didn't die with Jesus as he'd vowed. He turned tail and ran. The rational man had been controlled by panic.

Not only was he disillusioned with himself, he was confused about what following Jesus meant. Had he been deceived by all the kingdom talk, the miracles, the teaching, and the life? It certainly all seemed to be at an end now. Thomas seems to have an intimate knowledge of Jesus' wounds, so I suspect after his desertion at Jesus' arrest, he returned to witness the crucifixion. We know John was there too, but perhaps none of the others. Thomas witnessed that spear thrust into Jesus' side— its exact location forever etched into his memory. All Thomas could conclude now was that he was left to do life on his own. Of what use was the band of disciples without Jesus? Thomas was on his own.

DOUBT AND FAITH

In Thomas, we see that doubt can also be useful to true faith. Biblical faith is not sentimental or vague. It stands up to examination. It is rooted in real, historically verifiable events. I'm tempted to get into proofs of the resurrection here— the objective evidence is weighty when looked at honestly— but then I'd be preaching to the choir. You're here because you know He rose from the dead. But if you'd like to examine the evidence, I suggest Lee Strobel's book, [The Case for Christ](#).

And, we must remember, while in this life, faith will always be mixed with a bit of doubt. It is helpful for me to remember the father with the demon possessed son whom the disciples had failed to help. When Jesus asked him if he believed, he responded, "*Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!*" (Mark 9:24). Don't give up because your faith is mingled with

doubt. Is it 80% faith and 20% doubt? Maybe it is 50-50. Or maybe your faith is limping at 20% with 80% doubt. I expect 100% faith will never be ours in this life. Thus, we need to cry out with that father, *"Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!"* You see, faith itself is a gift, not something we conjure up.

I don't have trouble believing in God, the truths of the Bible, that God does miracles, that He heals, and in His power to save and transform lives. Where I often struggle is with the idea that He can work through me. And Satan wants us paralyzed with such doubt so we withdraw from any ministry. I've learned I need to ignore my misgivings and go ahead and do what it seems God is asking me to do in spite of my less than perfect faith and my inadequacies.

Doubts can serve a valuable function in keeping faith awake and moving. It pushes us to keep seeking, asking, and thinking. Do you remember all the news coverage regarding Mother Teresa's private diaries being released and how they expressed honest doubt and feelings of being abandoned by God? While many seemed shocked at such a revelation, I didn't find it surprising—nor should any who have walked very long with God. Faith doesn't mean there is never any doubt. The doubts remind us of how inadequate we are and our faith is and keep us seeking God. Faith comes from Him.

Thomas's statement, *"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"* (John 20:25) is actually an expression of faith if you think about it. It acknowledges the possibility of personal experience. Thomas knows that spiritual realities can be tested in the real world— they can be sifted and probed when they are the real thing. He will not settle for any vague, emotional/ spiritual experience of the other disciples feelings of Jesus' presence being with them. If Jesus rose from the dead, that claim needs to be tested. Thomas's "unless I" may be seen as the doubters mantra. But, on the other hand, it holds out the necessity of personal experience. By the end of the story, we realize his doubt is not so much to excuse unbelief as it is to establish robust, unshakeable faith.

At the same time, doubt is dangerous. Mark Buchanan offers this insight:

"Doubt has its limits. It can be Faith's tonic, a cleansing and invigorating force. But doubt can quickly turn corrosive or cancerous, burning or mutating healthy tissue. It can become a way of holding God for ransom. Our lives can degenerate into a fruitless and futile round of 'Unless I see, unless I touch, unless I have the experience, I will not believe.'"

He goes on to point out that the basic flaw of doubt is that it can never be satisfied. While it demands proof, it doubts the proofs. And in this sense, it becomes dishonest. It becomes an excuse because the person does not want to believe. And I expect you've met people like that. They are unwilling to make the changes in their lives that believing in Jesus as Lord and Savior would require— so they continue to manufacture doubts.

But that is not Thomas. There is honesty here. His desire and seeking is sincere. But he needs help. Here I am impressed with how the other disciples reach out to him.

THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH

The ten apostles and others have that Easter visitation behind their bolted doors. After that, they go out, seeking the missing Thomas to tell him the good news, *We have seen the Lord!* Thomas is the outsider. He has missed out, but they insist on keeping him in. We're not sure what it took to have him with them the next Sunday, but he was there. I expect his mood was gloomy. They were talking about stuff he hadn't experienced. You know the feeling when everyone is excited about an event you missed and they can't keep from talking about it. He felt left out, and wondered if it could be true. Maybe he felt guilty because he was in too depressed to be there last Sunday and make his own evaluation. Suddenly, Jesus was in their midst, again, "though the doors were locked." Now, He singles out Thomas. To Thomas's amazement, Jesus has heard his expressed skepticism, "Unless I see... and touch." Thomas doesn't have to ask. Jesus says,

"Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

Now, Thomas is confronted with a choice. *Stop doubting and believe.* He makes that choice to no longer hang onto doubt. The evidence is there. He makes the choice, fully grasping what that means. As I mentioned in the beginning, this the climactic statement of John. This five word exclamation of faith leads into John's statement of what his purpose has been through the whole gospel,

these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:31)

"My Lord and my God!" That is the affirmation of Easter and perhaps the most succinct prayer possible for following Jesus. Five powerful words.

- "My"— It must always come to a personal relationship. Following Jesus is not creeds, it is not religious activity, it must always boil down to a personal relationship. Is Jesus your Lord?
- "My Lord"— Here is the pledge of obedience. Listening to and following the directions and way of Jesus. It is placing Him in control, in charge.
- "My God"— And, it is worship. This is the Creator of the universe— the maker of all that is. He holds it all together. Here is unsearchable wonder and mystery. Yet, in Jesus He comes to us and loves us and wants us to be in personal fellowship with Him.

This is Thomas's resurrection out of the poisonous fog of failure and doubt he was in. It fills him with hope and purpose that keeps him with the other disciples, the community of faith, until the power of the Holy Spirit fills them all with resurrection life on Pentecost.

Here is Jesus, ever seeking the straying sheep. He's been listening to the doubts uttered in the secrecy of the darkness. But, He also needs the community of faith to be a means of grace, bringing Thomas back. Jesus knows Thomas will need the fellowship

of believers to keep on. They also need his practical, no nonsense grasp on reality.

And, from the early church traditions, after Thomas was filled with the Holy Spirit, He obeyed the Lord's call to take the Gospel on one of the most ambitious missionary journeys of all. He moved beyond the Roman Empire and headed off to India, where he established the church there.

CONCLUSION

This is also an important message for us. When we are wrestling with doubt; when we are dogged with failure and disillusionment; don't stay away from church or other believers. That is exactly where you need to be. For Jesus says,

*For where two or three are gathered in my name,
there am I in the midst of them (Matt 18:20).*