

“The Twelve Disciples”

Sermon # 5

Thomas: The Doubter

John 11:16

“Then Thomas, who is called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

Tonight we are going to examine Thomas, possibly the most maligned of all the Apostles. When I said that we are going to look at the apostle Thomas, what word immediately came to mind? “Doubting Thomas” right? The question is “Does he really deserve that as a lingering description of his life?”`

As to the person of Thomas, the bible narrative gives us very little. We know that Thomas was a Jew and in all probability was a Galilean. It is quite probable that Thomas, like at least three other of the disciples, was a fisherman by trade.

The first mention of Thomas by name was when the Lord chose the twelve and sent them out in pairs. In the listing of the apostles the names appear in pairs, and by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, seem to show how each man was drawn to a kindred spirit. If we look at the list we will find that Thomas is always paired with Matthew.

His name Thomas and the other name that he was known by “*Didymus*” both mean twin. (John 11:6) It has been suggested by some that his real name was Judah and his nickname “Twin” was used to distinguish him from the other two disciples named Judah (Judah the brother of James and Judas Iscariot). [Lockyer p. 175]

Thomas was a twin and that is as much as we know. We do not know whether he had a twin sister or a twin brother and we do not know their name. There has been a lot of surmising as to who his twin might have been. Some suggest that Matthew was his twin because they were always named together. The more far fetched maintain that he was the twin brother of Jesus. [Lockyer. p. 175]

Although it probably is unfair to remember Thomas only as a doubter it is fair to say that scripture portrays him as a person with a melancholy temperament. Thomas finds it easy to see the dark side of things. Thomas could find the dark lining of every silver cloud. Thomas would have probably been a proponent of “Murphy’s Law” which says in part, “*When things are going well, something will go wrong. When things just can’t get any worse, they will. Anytime things appear to be going better, you have overlooked something.*”

Thomas may have indeed had a personality that was geared toward melancholy but he was a believer just as the same. He was a man who we will see had to struggle against his doubts but a man who was ready to abandon his doubts at every opportunity.

If we turn to the gospel of John we find three sketches that reveal what Thomas was like. The first sketch we will refer to as

The Bethany Incident found in John 11:16

“Then Thomas, who is called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

Thomas did seem to always anticipate the worse in any given situation. In the first incident recorded here in John 11 Jesus has just notified of the illness of Lazarus and been begged by the family to come immediately to his aid. The disciples are not at all enthusiastic about going to Lazarus’ home in Bethany. Bethany is just outside Jerusalem and they remind Jesus that the last time he was in Jerusalem they had tried to stone him (v. 8).

The disciples plainly did not understand the urgency until Jesus explained that Lazarus was dead. Now they understood that he *had* to get back. He was determined to do so and there would be no talking him out of it. It was at this point that Thomas spoke up and said, “Let us also go, that we may die with Him.” (v. 16). Thomas in a fatalistic way views the only possible outcome that he could see, “*we are all going to die.*” But if the Lord was determined to go, Thomas is grimly determined to go with him. You have to admire his courage.

How different he is from Peter who had bragged “Lord I am ready to go with you into prison and to death.” (Luke 22:31). But these proved to be words that Peter could not back up with action. Thomas however backed his words with action, as he went with Jesus to what he expected to be certain death.

Perhaps rather than his moment of doubt we should remember Thomas’ complete devotion to Jesus. It is quite possible that he is an equal to the apostle John in this regard. From our study last time we would have to say that John was always near Jesus. But Thomas literally did not want to live without him.

The second sketch that reveals the character of Thomas we can refer to as The Upper Room Incident and it is found in John 14:1-6. “Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. (2) “In My Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. (3) “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. (4) “And where I go you know, and the way you know.”(5) Thomas said to Him, “Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?” (6) Jesus said to him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”

Jesus is trying to prepare the hearts of his disciples for his imminent death and departure from this earth. This was a sober occasion as any time it is necessary to discuss death with the living. I told you a few weeks ago, Debbie had the occasion to discuss with Barbara Philips her approaching death and the arrangements for her funeral. I found that an very uncomfortable thing to discuss, although to be fair, Barbara herself was not a bit uncomfortable. It is that kind of an evening for the disciples. The shadow of his departure weighed heavily on the disciples. Jesus sought to alleviate this by telling them of the joys of heaven and the place he is going to prepare for them. He tells them that knew that place that he was going to and the way to reach it. It was at this point that Thomas broke into the conversation to say, "Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?" (v. 5). It would seem Thomas did not hear what Jesus had to say about the mansions in glory did not, all his mind could comprehend was that Jesus was going to leave them. We have Thomas to thank for the revelation of verse six, Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." As one commentary says it was because of Thomas' question that we have in capsule form "all that we need to know, to believe, to love, to follow. Jesus is all we need, now and for eternity. We can never have more than He is; we must never be satisfied with less." [Herbert Lockyer. All the Apostles of the Bible. (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1972) p. 179]

The third and final sketch that reveals the character of Thomas is The Post-Resurrection Incident and it is found in –John 20:24-29. "Now Thomas, called the Twin, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. (25) The other disciples therefore said to him, "We have seen the Lord." So he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe."

On the very day of the resurrection, the risen Lord made his way to the house where his distressed disciples had gathered and provided them with evidence of and assurance that he had indeed arisen.

Unfortunately for Thomas he was not present for this visit. Thomas missed the entire thing. Why wasn't he there? Well we don't really know, but we can surmise from what we know of his personality that perhaps he wanted to get away to be alone with his grief. Not every one deals with grief in the same way.

When he showed up where the disciples were gathered they said to him, "We have seen the Lord." (v.25) His response to this was to say, "Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe." It was for this statement he would forever be known as "doubting Thomas." But in all fairness he is only asking for what the other disciples had received. In John 20:20 we are told that when Jesus had shown up in the room where the disciples are gathered, "He showed them his hands and his side." It was *then* that they had believed.

What we need to understand about Doubt!

First, Doubt is not the opposite of faith. The opposite of faith is unbelief and that is an extremely important distinction to make. In fact you can have an extremely strong faith and still have some doubts. Flannery O'Connor once said, *"Doubt always co-exists with faith, for in the presence of certainty who would need faith at all."*

In Mark chapter nine a man whose son was demon possessed came to Jesus to have him healed. He asked the Lord, "Lord if you can do anything, have mercy on us and help us." (v 22) Jesus responded by saying, "If you can believe all things are possible to him who believes" (v23). The father's response to Jesus was a classic, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" (v.24). He had faith and doubt at the same time. So doubt is not the opposite of faith.

Secondly Doubt is not Unforgivable.

God does not condemn us when we have honest questions. Do you remember that when John the Baptist was in prison, the man who exclaimed that Jesus was the Lamb of God, began to have doubts about who Jesus was. (Matt 11:1-6). Jesus did not criticize John or berate him for his lack of faith, he simply reminded John of scripture, and how he (Jesus) fulfilled those scriptures.

This demonstrates that when we have doubts and take them to God we can be assured that he will not condemn us. He will lovingly help us to find the answer to our questions so that we can leave our doubts behind.

While not altogether convinced of the truth of the resurrection by the testimony of the other disciples he at was present eight days later when Jesus reappeared (John 20:26). "And after eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, "Peace to you!" (27) Then He said to Thomas, "Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing."

In verse twenty-seven Jesus said to Thomas, "Be not unbelieving but believing" which carries the idea of *"become not unbelieving but believing."* The implication is that we can cultivate the habit of either belief or unbelief in our lives.

The rebound of Thomas' faith was both dramatic and magnificent; Thomas makes probably the grandest statement concerning Jesus to come from the lips of an apostle. In verse twenty-eight Thomas says, "My Lord and my God!" He is the only person in the New Testament to address our Lord as God! Perhaps it is this he should be remembered for and not his temporary doubt.

In response to Thomas' confession of faith Jesus said in verse twenty-nine,

"Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

There is a considerable amount of ancient (though non-biblical) testimony that suggests that Thomas carried the gospel as far as in India. The strongest traditions say that he was martyred for his faith by being run through with a spear and that he is buried on a hill near Madras, India.

Application

I want to conclude by considering two things about How we can win over doubt in our lives.

First, see if you can find the root of your doubt. Sometimes it is false understanding of who God is and what God does that is the cause of the problem. If we believe that being a Christian is a guarantee of health and prosperity we are going to question our faith when sickness comes or our finances are lacking. If we think that being a Christian is a blanket protection from the troubles in life, we are going to begin to doubt when difficulties come into our lives. The problem with these kind of doubting is not God. It is our false understanding of what God's word says.

Some people have doubt because their faith is based on feeling not fact. But when the feelings fade they begin to doubt if their faith was real. The problem then is the misconception that faith is fundamentally a feeling and it is not, it is an act of our will.

Secondly when we are struggling with doubt, don't isolate yourself as Thomas did but ask others and God for Help.

Remember that when John the Baptist realized that doubt was creeping into his life, instead of denying it, or ignoring it, he faced it. He did a very simple thing; he went to Jesus and asked for help.