

THOMAS
John 20: 24-29

Lessons By The Lake Summer Series
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Have you ever been at a meeting, have been too shy or intimidated to ask a question, and were glad when someone else stepped up and asked the question you were thinking? Have you ever felt that your question was really stupid so you were glad when someone else looked foolish?

It is amazing how we as people often don't want to let on that we don't know something or have people think we don't understand a simple concept. So we pretend we've got it figured out. And we are glad when someone else asks the clarifying or crazy question.

This seems to be true when it comes to the final disciple of Jesus that we will learn about today. Thomas, it seems to me, is one of the followers of Jesus who has throughout history been given a bum rap. The reason for this is because he is often referred to as the "Doubting Thomas."

The fact that he doubted, had questions, refused to simply believe people's words is often portrayed in a negative light. How could he do that?—he should have had faith. And yet the truth is that Thomas did not doubt any more than the other disciples—they all had fears.

The great thing about Thomas, however, is that he was the one who had guts enough to ask what others were thinking. And in many ways he has been the one who has given permission to great thinkers, and people like you and me, to also have doubts and questions.

It has often been said that in matters of faith in Jesus, the Bible, and the Christian life the only stupid question is the question that is not asked. There is absolutely nothing wrong or weak about not being sure about something and wanting to dig deeper in finding answers.

The Apostle Paul said that when I am weak then I am strong; but when I think I am strong then I am weak. A person who is honest enough to say they don't get it or willing to ask people for help is truly strong. It is important to be real.

On the other hand those who act like they've got it all together, or that they know all the answers, or are too intellectual to ponder simple things—they are truly weak; we should feel sorry for them. Doubts and questions are important for faith.

There are a couple great stories about Thomas that are included in the New Testament. One of these recounts the time when Jesus was preparing for the Passover and as he did this he attempted to prepare his friends, and disciples, for his coming death, resurrection and ascension.

In this account from John 14 Jesus said these words: *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me. My Father's house has plenty of room; if it were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back to take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going."*

It is at this point that Thomas steps up and asks the question: *“Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how do we know the way?”* In other words, Lord, this is not an easy concept to get my mind around—are you saying that there is something beyond this life?

Lord, even though I trust in you, and have put my life on the line in your service, this idea of resurrection and rooms in your Father’s house is beyond imagination. Lord, my finite and pea-sized brain just can’t intellectually comprehend such an infinite and amazing thing.

So Jesus responds to Thomas’ question: *“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.”*

Thomas asked this honest question and if he hadn’t, we may not have had this great answer and explanation from Jesus. And because of Thomas’ question the other disciples, like Philip, were able to ask Jesus some even more probing questions—like how he and his Father are one.

And through the ages Thomas’ question has continued to give us permission to ask similar questions. To believe in Jesus and his promises of eternal life are never easy. We can thank God that Jesus has prepared the way for us and through faith in him we have eternal life.

A second story about Thomas is the one we read today from John 20. It just so happens that Jesus, following his resurrection from the dead, had appeared to his disciples. The problem was that for some reason Thomas was not present when that happened.

When the other disciples told Thomas about how great it was that they had seen Jesus resurrected and alive Thomas said: *“Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my fingers where the nails were, and put my hand in his side, I will not believe.”*

Again, Thomas reflected the questions and doubts of people throughout the ages. This is too good to be true. Perhaps they were just seeing a spirit. Maybe the other disciples just made up this story. Why should I just believe their words?

It was a week later, however, when Thomas and all the disciples were together again with the doors locked. *“Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’ Then (Jesus) said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Stop doubting and believe.’”*

“Thomas said to him, ‘My Lord and my God.’ Then Jesus said to him, ‘Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.’” A great story of doubts and questions turned to faith and trust.

I have often said that if you and I want similar proof and assurance of Jesus’ resurrection, just look at Thomas and the other disciples. This group of fearful, doubting, questioning people were transformed by seeing Jesus. They were given boldness in their convictions.

And as a result this ragtag group of blundering and fully human people went out and literally changed the world and all of history. My friends, you don’t give up your life for a lie. Each of these disciples stayed unified to the end and were martyred for their faith in Jesus.

And as followers of Jesus throughout the ages have confronted similar uncertainties, and have learned from the examples and honest thinking of others, God's kingdom and Christ mission has grown strong.

Don't ever allow someone to tell you that the Christian faith is a myth or based on faulty and not very intelligent thinking. Our Christian faith and message is the most honest, the most questioned, the most struggled with truth of anything in all of history.

And because God and our faith encourages questioning and deep thinking, and wants no one to simply have "blind faith," the message and love of Jesus has not been able to be destroyed—and many have tried. Jesus is Lord and is the same yesterday, today and forever.

So what are some takeaways that we learn from our study of Thomas? Well, the first one is that, like Thomas, Jesus wants to reveal himself to us in our doubts and questions, and he wants to fill us with his gift of faith. And yet how does he do that?

Max Lucado says in his book, *Fearless: Imagine Your Life Without Fear*: *"Questions can make hermits out of us, driving us into hiding. Yet the cave has no answers. Christ distributes courage through community; he dissipates doubts through fellowship."*

"He never deposits all knowledge in one person but distributes pieces of the jigsaw puzzle to many. When you interlock your understanding with mine, and we share our discoveries, when we mix, mingle, confess and pray, Christ speaks."

So the takeaway we need to focus on is that none of us is smart enough or studious enough to figure out these complex things by ourselves. We need to be connected to the church in more ways than just membership. We need worship, small groups, and discussing faith with others.

The second takeaway from this story of Thomas is that as we seek the truth we need to be open to the Holy Spirit and all the places Jesus appears and is real in our world today. And as we experience Jesus we need to let down our guard and cry out, *"My Lord and my God!"*

There is no virtue, my friends, in hiding behind your protective shell of skepticism. There is no honor in doubting for the sake of doubting. Allow the Holy Spirit to open your eyes. Be open to the witness of what Jesus is doing in people and in the church. *"My Lord and my God!"*

The final takeaway from the story of Thomas is that God is calling you, and his church, to be bold witnesses and evangelists in this world filled with doubters and questioners. Jesus is calling us to go and make disciples of an extremely skeptical and seeking world.

And the answer to this call is not to act like you have all the answers or to make your faith seem unreal. No, the key is to let them know you continue to struggle for answers. And yet as you have experienced Jesus' love and presence, your faith is simply a process of learning and growing. And you will never have it all together—you can only trust the one who does.

So Thomas is a great place to end this series of messages. May God use your questions and doubts to challenge and grow your faith in Jesus. And as you do may you be able to proclaim like Thomas, *"My Lord and my God!"*