

## Thomas: A Christian Agnostic

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the Second Sunday in Easter, April 10, 1988. Scripture Lessons: Acts 4:32-35; Psalm 133; 1 John 1:1-2:2; John 20:19-31.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us next to nothing about Thomas. Maybe they thought it'd be best to say nothing about him than to admit that one of the apostles was a doubter. Only John dares to tell it like it is. He describes three incidents in the life of Thomas. <sup>①</sup>*The first* was when Jesus decides to go back into Judea after the religious leaders were planning to kill him. The other disciples try to talk Jesus out of going back but Thomas, with his droll and cynical sense of humor says, "Let's go, that we may die with him." Thomas always expected the worst. <sup>②</sup>*Another time* Jesus was talking with his disciples on the night he was betrayed. "Let not your hearts be troubled", he said.

~~"You believe in God. Believe also in me. 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 that where I am there you may be also. And where I go, you know and the way you know."~~

Those are among the most beautiful words in the whole Bible. I read them at every funeral. They're sacred. But not to Thomas. Nothing's sacred to him. He interrupts the sermon, destroys the whole mood, and flatly contradicts Jesus. "We *don't* know where you're going and we don't know the way." Thomas was an agnostic. An agnostic is someone who just doesn't know anything for sure. <sup>③</sup>*The third incident* is found in our Gospel lesson. Thomas wasn't with the other apostles on the first Easter so he hadn't seen the Risen Lord. When they told him about the resurrection he simply couldn't believe them. He said, "Unless I see the print of the nails, and unless I put my hand into His side, I won't believe." Thomas is certainly no example of a person who accepts the Gospel on simple faith. **HE DEMANDS EVIDENCE.**

Let's take a closer look at the doubt of Thomas. <sup>④</sup>*Some people doubt because they're simply unconcerned.* "Are you go to vote in the

HAS THE DOG BEEN OUT LATELY?  
WAS THERE ANYTHING THE DOG DID FOR YOU?

primary on April 26th?" "Oh, I don't know. I doubt it." ^ Translated, this means, "I'm not really concerned or interested." That's one kind of doubt.

It arises out of complacency. <sup>2</sup> But there's another kind of doubt.

Some people doubt who want to believe. ^ In fact, they feel so intensely the

importance of faith in Christ that they can't take things for granted. It's

like the doctor who tries to assure a patient before undergoing serious

surgery. She says, "This surgery <sup>has been</sup> is successful three out of four times.

Statistically speaking, you have an excellent chance of coming through since my last three patients have died." It's quite reasonable to

experience doubt and anxiety in that kind of situation. Your life's at stake.

But Jesus comes and says, "If you're coming with me, then take up your

cross and follow me." In other words, "If you follow me you're going to

die." ^ So it's reasonable to have questions and doubts about responding

wholeheartedly. The decision will cost us our lives. It's reasonable to ask

some questions. It's reasonable to hesitate and doubt when your life is at

stake. So some people doubt the truth of the Christian faith precisely

because they take the call of Jesus so seriously.

Secondly, Thomas finally believed in Christ because his

Christian friends never forgot him. Thomas wasn't a leading apostle.

He wasn't one of the inner circle like Peter, James and John. They could've

gotten along without him. Not only that but he wasn't a person who had the

gift of encouraging people. He was a negative person. He was pessimistic.

He was skeptical. The other disciples may have breathed a sigh of relief

when Thomas stopped meeting with them. They may have said, "Thank

heaven we're free of that wet blanket. He never has anything positive to

say. He's always raising questions. He always wants everything proved.

He can't take anything on simple faith." But that's exactly what they don't

say. Instead, when he stops meeting with them, they stop by and visit him.

They keep him posted on their experience with Jesus. They keep inviting

him to come back.

Let this teach us something about the inclusiveness of the church.

WITH A STRONG FAITH

Sometimes Christians can't stand people like Thomas; doubters, negative, different. But the early Christian church wasn't a closed group. It wasn't a chemically pure denomination permitting no one to step out of <sup>(line)</sup> life. They put up with a man who doubted the resurrection, the basic teaching of Christianity. What pained those first Christians the most, wasn't the unbelief and doubt of Thomas, but his absence. They missed him. They wanted him to be a part of their experience.

You know, I'm very orthodox in my theology. I believe in the resurrection of Jesus, and I'm concerned that Christians believe basic Christian doctrine. But my greatest concern isn't that our church may contain doubters and agnostics or others who have glaring sins. My concern is that our church should become so concerned about purity that we shut the doors and say, "Good riddance to troublemakers." It was largely due to his Christian friends who didn't give up on him, who didn't

forget him, that he came to an assured faith.

NOW WHY DOES JOHN INCLUDE THIS STORY?

~~Third~~, John includes this story about Thomas, not to glorify doubt, but to show how he became a firm believer. John doesn't glamorize doubt. He wants us to see that doubters can be Christians but, more importantly, he wants us to see that doubters can move from <sup>unbelief</sup> doubt to faith. We don't need to be paralyzed by our doubts and questions. And it's interesting to note that when doubting Thomas became a convinced believer his confession of faith was the boldest confession of all, Jesus is Lord and God. That's what happens so often. When a person has questioned and doubted and then becomes a convinced believer, often they are most outspoken about their faith. They don't embrace some watered-down version of the faith which is supposed to be digestible to the modern mind. Rather they embrace the story of Jesus, the Son of God, crucified and truly risen from the dead. e.g. Malcolm Muggeridge, C.S. Lewis, John Updike,

VIRGIN BIRTH, RESURRECTION

Finally, Jesus said to Thomas, "Have you believed because

you've seen me? Blessed are those who haven't seen and yet believe." Some of the Christians that I admire most are people who have so little upon which to base their faith. It's easy to believe when a loved one is miraculously healed of a terminal illness. But it's another thing to keep on trusting God when your world falls apart. Jesus doesn't say that if a person follows him their business won't go bankrupt. The gospel doesn't promise that, if two parents believe sincerely in Christ, death will never rob them of a child. Jesus doesn't promise that, if you're a Christian, there'll always be a supernatural intervention to lift you out of every tight corner. Some Christians experience all those things and their faith isn't shaken. They keep on trusting. Like Job, they cry out to God, "Though he slay me, yet shall I trust in him." Without seeing, they believe. On the basement walls of a bombed-out building in Germany shortly after WWII someone had written, "I believe in the sun, even when it's not shining. I believe in love, even when I don't feel it. I believe in God, even when he is silent."

Most Christians go through life living on raw faith. They never experience a miracle. They see many dreams go down the tubes. They've never had a dramatic religious experience like Paul on the road to Damascus and yet they have a firm and steady faith in Christ. They worship faithfully, never miss a Sunday, sit through sermons good and bad, put up with people who slight them or snub them; they serve Christ faithfully at work, in the home, and in the church. They're the ordinary Christians. They are the Christians who are such a blessing to me and the back-bone of the church of Christ. Truly, truly, "Blessed are they who have not seen and believed."