

# Thomas, the One Who Doubted

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## John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

What must it be like to go throughout history with a participle affixed to your name? “Doubting Thomas.” None of the other apostles is saddled with such a prefix. We could have designated Simon Peter as “Dithering Peter” because he was spineless and cowardly. Peter was forever making grand claims about his loyalty and steadfastness, but when it came time to make good on his boasts, he folded like a cheap suit. Or John. John was always sidling up to Jesus, claiming to be the favorite. “Brown-nosing John.” That would be appropriate. Or “Healing Luke,” to designate the physician.

But only Thomas has a participle linked to his name: Doubting Thomas. And it is in the nature of participles to designate continuing action, so Thomas is always doubting. It’s not like we say “Thomas, the guy who once, when presented with some incredible evidence said, ‘I’ll believe it when I see it.’” Or, “Thomas, the Guy Who Once Expressed Reservations and Asked for a Tad More Evidence.” Or, simply, “Thomas, the Man Who Doubted.” No, he’s known throughout the annals of history as Doubting Thomas. Always doubting, forever the positivist who demands evidence.

It’s not fair, in a way. Who can blame Thomas for expressing reservations? The man he had followed for several years had been executed and laid in a tomb. Now the other disciples approached Thomas with the improbable news that Jesus had cheated death and was no longer inhabiting that tomb.

Perhaps these guys were delusional. Perhaps they’d had a bit too much to drink. So Thomas expressed his doubts – and he was saddled forever with that participle: Doubting Thomas.

Several years ago, as I was preparing for ordination, I assisted in a parish about ten miles from my home. Just above the chair where I was customarily seated, on the reredos behind the altar, was a depiction of the twelve apostles. The apostle standing closest to me was Thomas, depicted with his arms crossed, his elbow cradled in one hand and the other

scratching his chin in the customary philosopher's pose suggesting thought – or doubt. Doubting Thomas.

Fairly often, especially when the morning's homily trailed off into the raspberry bushes, I would steal a glance at Thomas. "What do you think of all this stuff?" I'd ask silently. "Do you believe, or is the jury still out and you're considering the possibilities?"

His pose, the crossed arms and the fingers scratching the stubble on his chin, seemed to suggest that he wasn't entirely sure. He was still weighing the evidence, wanting to believe but not yet sure he was ready to surrender his intellect. Doubting Thomas, true to form.

I think one of the reasons we find Doubting Thomas so compelling is that we identify with him. We identify with his hesitation, with his reservations, with his desire for more evidence. Faith alone seems insubstantial somehow. We're not sure we want to make that leap, at least until we've satisfied our doubts.

Doubting Thomas may well be the patron saint of our scientific age. Enlightenment Rationalism is the theology of our time, not faith. Faith is too mushy, too soft, too unscientific. We have to have something more substantial. We want empirical evidence. Unless we can place our fingers into the wounds, we'll withhold judgment.

Thomas got that chance, of course, and all of his doubts suddenly dissipated. "Do not doubt," Jesus told him, "but believe." And Thomas did: "My Lord and my God."

Perhaps we shouldn't be so hard on Thomas. We too struggle to believe, for what follower of Jesus at one time or another hasn't been bedeviled by doubts? That's why we so identify with Thomas, Doubting Thomas. We share his suspicions, his skepticism, even as we seek to believe.

But Jesus validates our struggles. For those of us willing to fight through the illusory certainties of positivism, the false gospel of Enlightenment Rationalism, we find our reward in the adventure of faith. “Blessed are those who have not seen,” Jesus said, “and yet have come to believe.”

That’s enough to move even the most inveterate doubter.

Second Sunday of Easter

March 30, 2008

Christ Church

Watertown, Connecticut

Second Sunday of Easter

May 1, 2008

Christ Church

Middle Haddam, Connecticut