

## **Doubt, Wounds, and New Creation**

*Is. 26:2-9, 19 • John 20:19-31*

*Doubting Thomas.* I don't imagine St. Thomas is completely thrilled with the nickname he has been given throughout the past twenty centuries. If I were Thomas, I would likely be doing everything within my power to remind people of the *other* places I appear in the New Testament. "Guys. Remember that time in John 11 when Jesus says that he was going back to Judea, which we all knew was a very dangerous thing for him to do, and I was all like 'Let's go die with Jesus!'" It wasn't the wisest comment, and it wasn't free of sarcasm, but surely it should merit a nickname better than *Doubting Thomas*.

Maybe the nickname *Doubting Thomas* goes too far. After all, when we actually read the text, Jesus's rebuke of Thomas could apply to any of the disciples. "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." But was Thomas the only disciple who saw first, and then believed? Not even close.

Mary Magdalene's first announcement to the disciples was that she "saw the Lord"; when Jesus appeared to the disciples while Thomas was absent John records that "he showed them his hands and his sides, *then* the disciples rejoiced *when they saw* the Lord"; even the author of the Gospel of John recalls that he himself ran into the tomb, *saw*, and *then* believed. Jesus's own invitation to his earliest followers' questions about who he was and what he was doing was an invitation to "Come, and *see*." Seeing Jesus for who he is, and then believing, is something to be celebrated, not rebuked. Other than not being in the right place at the right time, Thomas does not initially appear to be especially guilty of doubt beyond that which was normative for Jesus's other followers. Why then, does the Gospel of John feel the need to record this rebuking of Doubting Thomas?

John doesn't tell us everything there is to know about Jesus and those closest to him. He tells us as much at the end of our Gospel reading. All History is selective in the details it records, and the Gospel of John is no exception.

So when specific details are shared—the type of food enjoyed by a crowd, the time of day an event occurs, the day of the week that Mary and the other women visit Jesus’s tomb, the details must matter. All that to say this: there must be some reason—a very good one in fact—that John takes a few paragraphs here to describe Thomas’s slow, skeptical path to belief. And I don’t think it has much to do with Thomas himself. Maybe John’s recording of Thomas’s doubt is less about Thomas, and more about you and me.

The Gospel of John was originally written to a community that likely had some access to the other Gospels. Like our own culture, the community to which John was writing contained those who had heard about Jesus of Nazareth, including the claim that he had been raised from the dead. And like our own responses at times, many of those who heard such claims were hesitant to believe them.

It is a silly notion for us to believe that modern, scientific society is the first to be skeptical of the claim that Jesus was raised from the dead. We are often guilty of—quite arrogantly—thinking that it was somehow easier to believe in the resurrection in the 1st century than it is in the 21st. “They didn’t have access to the scientific research that we do,” we might think, “so of course they thought humans could be raised from the dead.” This way of thinking is a prime example of what C.S. Lewis calls *chronological snobbery* - the blind acceptance of the superiority of the intellectual climate of our own age, and the intellectual disdain for ages before our own. Let’s be very clear: humans in the 1st century knew just as well as humans in the 21st century that once a person dies, they stay dead. The claim that Jesus’s body was physically raised from the dead was just as shocking then as it is now. Twenty centuries of humans have been exposed to the claim that Jesus is alive, and that in the resurrection He ushered-in new creation. And twenty centuries of humans have experienced some level of doubt,

skepticism, and hesitancy to believe that Jesus is alive, or that his resurrection has anything to do with us.

So what we find in John's account of Thomas is actually a personification of our own doubt, skepticism, and hesitancy to believe things that are too good to be true.

We see someone in Jesus's own day who, at times, also struggled to believe. Sometimes it helps just knowing that we are not alone in our doubt. Thomas spent years following Jesus, was personally told by his closest friends that Jesus was alive, and yet he was still hesitant to believe. Sometimes we need to encounter people like Thomas when we read Scripture. It can be encouraging to read of Saints who have boldly sacrificed everything in order to follow Jesus; it is also encouraging to read of Saints that seem a bit more like you and me. Peter denies Christ when it becomes awkward to associate with him; Paul spends his entire life struggling with a thorn in his flesh; Martha is, at times, too busy to pay attention to Jesus. What we have in the story of Thomas is someone like us.

But that is not all we have in the story of Thomas. Knowing that we are not alone in our struggle is important; hearing Jesus's response to Thomas, and therefore hearing Jesus's response to our own doubt is essential.

So this morning let's try to answer three questions:

- 1 Why was Thomas so hesitant to believe that Jesus had been raised from the dead?
- 2 How does Jesus respond to Thomas?
- 3 If Thomas is a personification of our own doubt, skepticism, and hesitancy to believe, how does Jesus respond to us today?

Question 1: Why was Thomas so hesitant to believe in the first place?

I think our Old Testament reading this morning contains a major clue. As a first century Jew living in Palestine, Thomas was born into an ocean of Jewish expectation and hope. First century Jews were living in the wake of a

rough 2000 years since Abraham left his homeland in order to follow God. Their history was one of oppression, slavery, famine, destruction, and exile. Yet along the way they experienced, on occasion, salvation. In the face of centuries of Egyptian slavery, God raised up Moses to lead the people through the Red Sea and into the Promised Land. During the messy reign of the Israelite Judges, God raised up a foreign woman named Ruth and a faithful Hebrew named Boaz to forever alter the course of history with the birth of their son Obed, the grandfather of King David. After a bloody civil war that lasted generations, the Hebrews suffered what is perhaps their darkest blows in the Old Testament: Babylon attacks Jerusalem and destroys the Temple. As if this were not enough, the surviving Hebrews were taken as exiles to once again live in a land that was not their own. It is during this period of exile, after the devastating destruction of the temple, that the prophet Isaiah visits the Hebrews.

Our reading from Isaiah this morning captures the expectation and hope of the Jewish people in the centuries leading to and including the time of Jesus. Isaiah 26 speaks of a coming peace. But our English word “peace” needs some help communicating the Hebrew word it replaces. *Shalom*. Eugene Peterson puts it well, “Shalom, ‘peace,’ is one of the richest words in the Bible. You can no more define it by looking up its meaning in the dictionary than you can define a person by his or her social security number.” Shalom communicates a number of things: entering into a state of wholeness and unity; a restored relationship. It is an all-encompassing wholeness that results from God’s will being completed in us. “It is the work of God that, when complete, releases streams of living water in us and pulsates with eternal life.” Isaiah is telling his first hearers and all those who would hear his words for generations to come to be on the lookout for *Shalom*. Wait for *Shalom*. Expect *Shalom*.

In the face of the oppressive Babylonian empire, our Isaiah passage also speaks of a time when those in

authority will be brought low, when the path to salvation is made level so that even those who are poor and needy can find their way.

And in the final section Isaiah tells his hearers to be on the lookout for life. But not just life for the living. Isaiah says that a day is coming when “the dead shall live,” that “the earth will give birth to those who have been long dead.” Generation after generation died before seeing a time of *Shalom*, before seeing the level path to salvation. Entire centuries passed without any sign of either. And in the face of this reality, Isaiah says that *Shalom* is not *Shalom* until those who died without it are brought to new life in order to experience it.

So these are some of the expectations engrained in the Hebrew collective consciousness: *Shalom*, the defeat of oppressive enemies, and resurrection. None of these realities, for the Hebrews in their day or for us in our own, happen naturally. But the prophets of the Old Testament, as diverse as they are, speak with one voice

when they say that against all odds we are to trust and wait for these things to come.

So now imagine Thomas the first time he met Jesus. Here comes a man talking of a “Kingdom of God” that is on its way to earth. A man who speaks of *abundant* life. A man who displays power over the oppressive enemies of disease, oppression, and even death. And the longer Thomas is around Jesus, the more it appears that he may actually be the one to bring the expectation and hope of the Hebrews to their perfect end. He might just be the bringer of *Shalom*. God is finally bringing His everlasting Kingdom, one where even death has no power, down to earth in and through the same Jesus whom Thomas was following. It is hard to describe the level of anticipatory joy experienced by Jesus’s closest followers as they slowly discovered that He was claiming to be the Messiah. The heights of this anticipatory joy are likely what made Good Friday so low for Thomas and the other disciples. In the eyes of 1st century Jews, a crucified Messiah is a failed Messiah.

When Jesus of Nazareth was executed by the Roman government, Thomas did not lose a friend he had known for a few years; He lost all hope that had been part of the Hebrew people's collective consciousness for a millennium. The weight of centuries of failed expectations were placed, once again, on Thomas's shoulders. It was his own sorrow, as well as the sorrow of generations of his people that Thomas experienced in the week following the crucifixion of Jesus.

We mentioned earlier that maybe the nickname *Doubting* Thomas goes too far. Knowing what we know now, maybe it doesn't go far enough. A more appropriate nickname, one that captures the weight of his circumstances might just be something like *End of his rope* Thomas. Or maybe *Been hurt too many times to ever trust again* Thomas. And when we place ourselves in the story, as John is inviting us to do, we see even more nicknames for Thomas. *Struggling to make ends meet* Thomas. *Drowning in guilt* Thomas. *Where is God*

*when I really need Him Thomas. Do I even really believe any more Thomas.*

When we consider Thomas's situation, I think we know the answer to the question "Why was Thomas so hesitant to believe?" because in Thomas we see our own hesitancy to believe. I get Thomas, because I am Thomas. And like Thomas, I really, really need some sort of response from Jesus.

Question 2: How does Jesus respond to Thomas?

Artistic depictions of this scene in John's Gospel often include Thomas reaching out to touch the wounds of Jesus. This very well may have happened, but John never actually tells us that Thomas touched, or even reached for, Jesus. He simply records that something about his interaction with Jesus caused Thomas to believe: "My Lord, and my God!"

So what made Thomas believe? What could Jesus have said or done to convince Thomas that he was who he said he was? I think Jesus shared the only words that Thomas could hear in that moment:

*“Shalom, Thomas.”*

*“Peace, Thomas.”*

Not “Peace is coming, please be patient” but *“Peace be with you. Here and now: Shalom.”*

Jesus announced to Thomas that, against all hope, new creation is here. Shalom is here. The oppressive enemy has been defeated. The path to salvation has been made available to everyone. Resurrection has begun. *Shalom.*

But Jesus shared more than words with Thomas. He showed him his wounds. His battle with the enemy was not one fought with mere words, but with nails, and spears, and tombs. And though he took the worst blows

the enemy has to offer, he emerged as victor. He is not just the fulfillment of Isaiah, he is also the fulfillment of Genesis. He is the one, born of woman, who has finally crushed the skull of the serpent.

Jesus's message for Thomas, in perhaps his darkest moment, is: "Peace is here, the battle is won, and I am alive and well to show you the wounds."

This leads us to our final question: If Thomas is a personification of our own doubt, skepticism, and hesitancy to believe, how does Jesus respond to us today?

Every time we gather for worship, we experience the same responses from Jesus that Thomas did, if we know how to listen.

In a few minutes, we will stand, turn to family, friends, and strangers alike, and declare to one another some of the most powerful words ever spoken: "Peace be with you." Jesus, through the community that is gathered here

today, still speaks these words to us. Some weeks we *really* need to hear these words. Other weeks, someone around us *really* needs for us to say these words. The Church is the hands and feet of Jesus, and in this case, we are also to be the mouth of Jesus. “Peace be with you.” “Shalom.”

Sure, it can also be a nice opportunity to stretch after a sermon that was just a bit too long or a bit too slow, but it is at its core a powerful opportunity to declare—and to hear—that through Jesus Christ, *Shalom* is here. “Peace be with you.” What greater news could we share or hear than this?

Before our culture became scared of germs, these words were actually shared with a kiss. I am not suggesting that we return to that (though I am not *not* suggesting it either...). But can't we at least consider an embrace?

So Jesus's words to Thomas are Jesus's words to us today: “Peace be with you.” And each one of us has the

privilege and responsibility to be the mouth of Jesus to those around us.

But Jesus shared more than words with Thomas, and He shares more than words with us today. After the sharing of “Peace be with you” we are invited to see, touch, and consume the broken body and shed blood of Jesus. We are invited to experience his battle wounds.

There is an ancient tradition in the church to repeat the words of Thomas when the Celebrant raises the body and then the blood of Christ. When Jesus’s wounds are raised by the Priest, we respond, like Thomas, by declaring Jesus as Lord of the Universe and Lord of our lives.

“The body of our Lord.”

“My Lord, and my God.”

“The blood of our Lord.”

“My Lord, and my God.”

So Jesus’s words to Thomas are Jesus’s words to us today: “Peace be with you.” And Jesus’s invitation for

Thomas to behold his battle wounds is His same invitation he extends to each of us.

We find, week after week, that the risen Jesus responds to our own doubt, skepticism, hesitancy, and wounds the same way he responded to Thomas. We who doubt find assurance. We who are wounded find healing. And when this happens, we are prepared then to bring the message of Peace and Healing beyond the walls of the Church.

What we do in here on a Sunday will affect what we do the rest of the week. When we share the wonderful message that “Shalom is here” week after week with one another, we are strengthened to bring Jesus’s message of Peace to a doubting, skeptical, and hesitant world. When we encounter the wounded body and blood of the risen Jesus week after week in the Eucharist, then we are strengthened to bring the news of resurrection to a wounded world.

So may we hear the words of Jesus, and accept his invitation to behold and participate in his victory-granting wounds. But may we do so realizing that this gift is not just for us, but for the whole world.

Let us pray.

*Almighty and everliving God, we are frail creatures. We are prone to doubt even when your provision is seen all around us. We are skeptical of your power over the universe. We are hesitant to believe that you really do love us. Will you meet us week by week, and day by day, like you met Thomas. May we hear your words of Peace and may we accept your gift of the Eucharist in a way that we may show forth in our lives what we profess by our faith. Through Jesus Christ, our living Lord and our living God, who with you and the Holy Spirit is worshiped and glorified forever. Amen.*