

Thomas, Without a Doubt

I have a complaint to make: I think I've been treated unfairly. I'm talking about all this "Doubting Thomas" business. Somebody expresses a little mistrust, some judicious wariness, a lack of credulity in the face of improbable assertions, and right away it's, "Oh, stop being a Doubting Thomas!" I think I'm getting a bum wrap. Why is it that when someone rightly suspects he's being taken in by a scam that you don't call him a "*Clever* Thomas"? Why is it when someone says he'd like some concrete evidence before he'll believe something really strange or unusual that you don't call him a "*Cautious* Thomas"? For goodness sake, just south of us are millions of people who are so proud of their lack of gullibility that they call their land the "Show Me State"; but no one thinks there's something wrong with Missourians, do they? You don't think they're stupid or ignorant, do you?

Oh wait ... okay, so maybe that's not the best example ... but I think you get my point. Here I am, straddled for all eternity with this "Doubting Thomas" thing. Seems like I make one little mistake, and it's the only thing people remember about me. Moses can commit murder, Peter can deny the Lord – not once, but *three* times, Paul can persecute the church; but people always remember the good things about them. But *me*? One (very reasonable, I think) case of guarded discretion, and I'm practically branded the "unbeliever". It's just not fair.

And you have to understand it's part of my personality to be a little suspicious—and for good reason: I learned to be that way. You see, I'm one of those people who are always very serious. I could play the perfect straight man. I take everything at face value. Open. Honest. No tricks or double meanings—that's me. As a result, people sometimes joke around at my expense. Take the rest of the disciples for example. You probably picture them with halos on their head looking pious and holy and praying all the time, right? Well, I *knew* those guys, and they weren't like that at all.

Most of them were fishermen, right? Well, I wasn't. Fact is I'd never even been in a boat before I met any of them. I couldn't swim, and I didn't like the water. Keep me on good ol' dry ground, thank you very much. I really hated that whole time we spent around the Sea of Galilee. Jesus would say, "Let's cross over to the other side of the lake." I'd say, "Tell you what, I'll walk around and meet you there." He'd say, "Thomas, get in the boat." Oh man. The rest of them thought it was great fun. They'd slap me on the back and say, "Don't worry Tom, we'll make a real seaman out of you." Then they'd holler orders at me to, "Belay the scuppers abaft the beam", "Hoist the mizzen spar amidships", and "Weigh the bosun over the gunwale." I never knew what they were talking about. Then, to get a laugh, they'd put me to work doing all kinds of silly, useless things. You remember that day we caught all those fish? After we got them all in the boat, James tells me to sort through them all and throw back the ones with their eyes closed because it wasn't considered sporting to catch fish that were asleep. Well, I didn't know any better, so ... Oh, they thought that was *real* funny. Ribbed me about it for weeks.

But don't get me wrong; I didn't think they were pulling my leg about Jesus rising from the dead. We were all shaken up pretty bad. That wasn't something they'd joke about. I knew at least that *they thought* they'd seen him—and I wasn't quite sure what to make of it. I tried to believe them, but I couldn't. But to help you understand, I guess I should explain a couple of other things.

First, there's this "Didymus" thing. That was what everybody called me: Didymus. It means "twin"; you know, as in "twin brother". That was me: my brother's twin. He was first. He always got all the attention. He had all the talent—everything going for him. He always got the girl. You know the type. No matter what I did, he was always a step higher. I guess I was pretty resentful. But it's tough when no one can even remember you're name, so they just call you so-and-so's twin. I hated the fact that my life was always totally defined by my inferior relationship to somebody else.

We got along all right. But because he was thirty-six minutes older than me, he inherited the family business when our Father died, leaving me to find another career. You might say that he got the bagel and I got the hole. So I studied a lot ... tried my hand at a few things over the years, but I couldn't quite find my niche. No matter what I did, Mom was always disappointed. And my brother, well, he kept trying to "help" me get my life sorted out. But I didn't want his help. I wanted to make it on my own. I wanted to get out of his shadow. And I thought I'd found the ticket when Jesus came along.

I remember the day I told my mother and brother I'd become a disciple of the True Messiah. They both just sat there staring at me with their mouths open. After a long while my brother says, "Tom, after all these years are you finally getting a sense of humor? It's a joke, right?" When I insisted I was serious, mom burst into tears and ran out of the room. My brother tried for hours to talk me out of it. Told me to grow up, get real, and stop making a fool of myself—and the rest of the family. Finally, he *orders* me to stay away from that "half mad prophet from 'pigsty' Nazareth." That was all I could take. I dumped years of built up frustration on him. On the way out the door I yelled at him, "You just can't stand the thought of me being somebody, can you? You're jealous because he chose me and not you. You'll see. Jesus *is* the Messiah, and when he sets up his kingdom, I'm going to be somebody important."

And you need to know that I was so *sure* about Jesus. Even before I ever saw one of his miracles, just listening to him speak, I knew he was the Chosen One. I used to sit enraptured as he taught things that were strange and new, and yet, when you heard them you thought, "That's so *right*—why didn't I see that before?" And of course, I saw him do amazing things too. You've heard about some of them. But what impressed me the most about Jesus was that he was always so "in charge". He knew what he was doing, didn't let anything shake him, and just fearlessly, calmly went about his business. It didn't matter what was going on around him: storms on the lake, angry mob trying to kill him, people with sad, terrible problems ... "Faith", he kept telling us, "Have no fear. Trust in God and all things are possible." He had that kind of trust—and I wanted it too.

I even tried to show that kind of faith. When Lazarus died in Bethany, Jesus said he had to go there and "wake him up". We knew it was dangerous to go back there. Bethany is right outside Jerusalem, and just a short while before Jesus had had a face-to-face confrontation with the religious leaders there. When he claimed to be God, they tried to stone him (and us too). We left the city under a cloud. Jesus seemed confident, but we were scared. We weren't used to seeing Jesus back down like he did. He just said it wasn't his time yet. Since then he'd been talking of going back to Jerusalem, even of dying there. When he said it was time to go back, I wanted the others ... *and Jesus* to know that I wasn't afraid, so I said to them, "Let's go and die with him." The words came easy, and I thought I meant them ...

When we got there, we found out that Lazarus had been dead for over half a week. "Oh well, too late for him", I thought. Boy, was I wrong. With the same old confidence, Jesus

walks up and has the tomb opened. I'm thinking, "Here's where the whole thing will come undone. Jesus is going to make a fool of himself—and us." But out comes Lazarus from the grave like he was getting up from a nap. I realized then that Jesus was more than we had imagined. We were calling him the Christ, he himself had said he was God ... it was just starting to dawn on me what we were really saying.

Then when we went into Jerusalem. Crowds of people were cheering and welcoming him ... it was a lot different than last time we left the city. We were expecting something really big to happen. All that talk of dying was forgotten. A new age was dawning—and we were part of it. And all I kept thinking about was what it was going to be like when my twin brother came crawling up to me begging for a favor, and saying how wrong he'd been, and how sorry he was. I replayed that scene in my mind a hundred times, toying with various ways I might respond. Crush him? Cast him out? Humiliate him? Strange thing was that every such fantasy was abruptly interrupted by the thought, "No, Jesus would never go for that."

The night we celebrated the Passover together, Jesus' mood had changed. He didn't seem quite so upbeat. He kept talking in riddles that we didn't understand. Now he was talking of dying again ... told us we were eating his body and blood. He told us to do it to remember him. He said he was going away, to his Father, and when he came back, he was going to take us there too. He told us we already knew the way to get there. It didn't make any sense. I couldn't take it any more of this confusing talk, so I said to him, "Jesus, what are you talking about? We don't know where you're going, how can we possibly know the way?" He looks at me and says, "Thomas, [where have you been?] *I am* the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Well, you know what happened later that night. How he was arrested and went to trial. I saw parts of it, and I couldn't understand what was going on. What happened to the Jesus I knew who was always so in control of things? Sure, he acted just as confident and fearless as ever, but things weren't turning out right. He didn't argue with them like he did before. He didn't slip away from their grasp like he always had. He let them abuse him in frightful ways. I kept thinking, "Any minute now, he's going to let them have it." But things just kept getting worse.

I watched from a distance as they lifted him on the cross. I heard them laughing at him and telling him to come down if he was who he said he was; and all the while I was praying, "Yes, come down and show them—show *me ... if you can.*" It went on for hours ... and I tried to hang on to the hope I had in him. But now all I could think about was how my brother would be laughing at me. I envisioned myself humiliated, going crawling to him for help, saying how wrong and foolish I had been. I swore *that* would never happen. I'd flee to another country, change my identity, something ... But can you imagine it? Here my Lord was dying, and all I could think about was how it was going to effect me; me, the one who said, "Let's go die with him".

When he died, I was lost. Completely disillusioned. More than that: I was angry. I said, "You're the *way*, are you? Well, if that's the way, I want no part of it—or of you!"

I hid with the others that night and during the Sabbath the next day; but already I was planning my escape. I started distancing myself from them because I was pretty sure we were all going to be in trouble if we stayed around. As a matter of fact, that's why I wasn't there when he first came to the other disciples. I was making arrangements to skip out on them.

When I got back, they were all laughing and shouting. “We’ve seen him, Thomas! He’s alive!” Like I said before, I didn’t think they were joking. Some kind of group delusion, maybe? I saw him die. I saw the spear puncture his heart. And I know what you’re thinking, “Thomas, you saw him raise dead people, why did you doubt?” It’s true. I saw him raise dead people—but their bodies were intact. They got sick and died. But if you’ve ever seen someone crucified, and what that does ... well, I couldn’t imagine how *that* body could come back to life.

But there’s more still: in a way, I was afraid it was true. I was scared of what it would mean if he really were alive again. First, because of my own evil thoughts, the things I had said and done since his arrest. Maybe he came when I wasn’t around because now I was out of the group. I had rejected him—maybe he was rejecting me. But another reason was because I was afraid. What if he was the way, like he’d said to me? What if his way meant suffering and maybe even dying like he did? What if his way meant rejection and humiliation? If he were alive, I could expect the same for myself, so in a sense, *I didn’t want him to be alive*—and I felt guilty about that too! That’s why I dug my heels in like I did. That’s why I refused to believe. And I hated myself for it.

And just when I was thinking that no one deserved less to have Jesus come to him, he was there. He came into our little gathering and showed me his hands and side—the wounds in his flesh. And it’s strange, I wasn’t afraid of him, nor did his scars horrify me. Instead, I found overwhelming comfort and peace in knowing that he suffered those wounds for me. He gave himself to cover my selfish thoughts, my mistrust, my unbelief ... In his wounds I learned what God’s love was all about – and they gave me the courage and faith to follow him in the way, the truth, and the life. Funny, I always fought against having my life defined by my inferior relation to someone else. Now I see it is the only way to truly *live*.

And I did. After he ascended, I had the privilege of taking his name eastward toward what is today Iraq, Iran, and India; I didn’t care where he sent me—but I’m glad I got to stay on dry ground. And my brother? Well, I apologized for the years of resentment and anger. I shared the good news of Jesus with him. I even invited him to come with me and together we shared the good news of Christ.

And that’s what I came here to tell you today. You see, he knows that you’re a lot like me. You have doubts, fears, jealousies, and selfish ambitions just like I did. You’re afraid to go his way and give yourselves in love for one another. You’re afraid of what you might lose. And you might think it’s a disadvantage that you don’t get to see him like I did. But you’re wrong about that. You see, you believe that he rose from the dead. And so you’re doubly blessed. First because you have the gift of faith that believes without seeing; and second because you understand that the risen Lord Jesus comes into your gathering here to speak to you through his Word. He also comes to you in the water of Baptism that unites you with him in his death, burial, and resurrection. And in the Sacrament of Holy Communion he presents you with his body that was broken and his blood that was shed so that you too, by faith, can touch his wounds just like I did, and receive from them that same assurance of forgiveness and peace that he gave me. With them he continues to give everything you need for the salvation of your soul, and what will equip you to overcome the world in all trials and temptations so that you can be like me: Thomas, without a doubt.

Soli Deo Gloria!