

Today we begin a new series called Encountering Resurrection. Over the next six weeks leading up to Pentecost we'll explore biblical characters whose lives were transformed by encountering the risen Lord Jesus. It's our hope that this series will show us that resurrection isn't just something that happened to Jesus, but something that happens in us as well.

Today we'll look at the life of the disciple Thomas. A little background first. A couple weeks ago at Easter we read John's account of the disciples being huddled together in fear behind locked doors when all of a sudden the resurrected Jesus showed up in their midst. Thomas is the only unlucky disciple not to be there. If you've ever been the only one of your friends or family to miss a particularly special event, you can begin to empathize with Thomas. A couple months ago during the worst of all our winter storms this season, my wife and I were stuck in the snowed out Charlotte airport as her sister was getting married in sunny California. Not fair, but in the end it was just a wedding, and we still got there in time to see our family. Poor Thomas missed witnessing the resurrected Jesus the first time around. But Jesus still came near and offered him grace.

Jesus comes near in our midst today as well, both through the reading of God's word and later in the sacrament of Holy Communion. Let's honor our resurrected king by standing in his presence to hear his word. Please stand and sing.

John 20

24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin ), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 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." 26 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." 27 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." 28 Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" 29 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."

This is the word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God!**

Have you ever missed out on something unbelievable? Like a really incredible party, or a great sports game, or an amazing concert? I think the only thing worse than missing something like that is having to listen to all the people who were there tell you about the incredible thing you missed. I wonder how many times Thomas had to hear his friends give the play by play of Jesus' resurrection appearance. "Thomas, man I can't believe you weren't here! Where were you, buddy?! It was awesome! One minute we're all just sitting around trying to make sense of Jesus being killed... and the next minute, there he is! Jesus! He was standing right here, in the middle of the room! And the doors were even locked! Showed us his scars and everything! He's alive! I can't believe you missed it!!"

As if it weren't bad enough that Thomas was late to the resurrection party, he then gets stuck with a terrible nickname. How do we remember Thomas? What do we call him? *Doubting* Thomas. That's not in the bible, by the way. The only nickname he has in the bible is the Twin. Much more benign. Doubting Thomas is a nickname we Christians have given him and it's stuck through the centuries.

I came across this cartoon<sup>1</sup> that expresses just how frustrating that name must be to Thomas. It's impossible to read on screen but you can see the exasperated Thomas standing there with his hands in the air. He's complaining, "All I'm saying is we don't call Peter 'denying Peter' or Mark 'ran away naked Mark.' Why should I be saddled with this title?"

For those of you pulling out your phones to google it like I did, let me save you a step. It's Mark 14:52. Yep, Mark really did that.

But we call him Doubting Thomas. That's the name that stuck. But if we look a little closer, we see Thomas could have ended up with other names. Thomas speaks two other times in the gospel of John, and both of them are worth looking at because they teach us more about what true discipleship looks like.

First off, in John 11 we read about Lazarus being sick and close to death. At the time Jesus and the disciples were in a different town, having just been run out of Judea by people who had tried to kill Jesus there. When Jesus says he wants to go back to Judea be with Lazarus, the disciples seem understandably hesitant. *Um, Jesus, do you really think it's a good idea to go back to that place where they want to kill you?* When Jesus tells them Lazarus is dead listen to who boldly speaks up.<sup>2</sup>

John 11:16 – Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Don't see much doubting here, do we? Rather, we see a zealous and fiercely loyal follower of Jesus. The other disciples are all worried about what might happen to them. But not Thomas. He's willing to follow Jesus no matter what. Even if it means danger. Even if it means death. Maybe he should have been called Thomas the Brave. Later in the gospel of John (15:13)<sup>3</sup> Jesus says, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." Perhaps Thomas the Great would have been a better nickname.

Elsewhere in John's gospel we see another side of Thomas that's worth emulating: Thomas isn't afraid to ask questions. In John 14 Jesus is talking to his disciples about going to prepare a place for them in his father's house. Jesus tells them, "You know the place where I am going." Sometimes I really feel for the disciples because it seems like Jesus just throws things out there at them as if it's straightforward well-known fact when it's actually pretty confusing. *Many rooms in my father's house, I'm going there to prepare one for you. Ah but you already know how to get there.*

I can just see the disciples looking around at each other like "Um...do you have any idea what he's talking about? Where's his dad's place? Is that heaven? Is he talking about heaven? Where's that again? I don't know, ask him. No, you ask him!" And of course it's Thomas who is not afraid to speak up, even at the risk of sounding dumb.<sup>4</sup> John 14:5 Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" And Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." But how much courage does it take for Thomas to speak up and ask the question everyone is thinking? And

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<sup>1</sup> On screen please. <http://blueeyedennis-siempre.blogspot.com/2011/04/2nd-sunday-easter-2011-doubting-thomas.html>

<sup>2</sup> John 11:16 on screen please.

<sup>3</sup> On screen please John 15:13.

<sup>4</sup> On screen please John 14:5.

again, all he wants to do is follow Jesus. Which way do we go? Thomas the Truthseeker. Thomas the Courageous.

During Holy Week in our Living Last Supper on Thursday night, Thomas the Twin rightly asks the audience, “Why do people remember my doubts but forget my daring? Remember my fears but forget my faith?” That’s a good and honest question. Because we remember him as Doubting Thomas.

That hardly seems fair. After all, would any of us have acted any differently? Thomas wasn’t being unreasonable. He was told that Jesus, the man he had seen beaten and crucified to death three days earlier, that same Jesus had somehow miraculously appeared to the disciples alive and well with the scars to prove his identity. What would you have said to that claim? How would you have responded?

We know how the disciples responded the first time they heard the news. Remember, Jesus appeared to Mary before he appeared to them. Upon hearing Mary’s incredible proclamation “I have seen the Lord!” – what did the disciples do? Well, they didn’t exactly take to the streets shouting He is risen! No. Instead they locked themselves in a room, afraid that the same people who killed Jesus were after them next. Why don’t we think of them as doubters?

It wasn’t until Jesus appeared to the disciples in the midst of their locked room saying, “Peace be with you” and showing them the scars on his hands and side that they believed.<sup>5</sup> Only then did the disciples rejoice – when they saw the risen Lord for themselves. How can we fault Thomas for wanting the same thing?

And still we call him Doubting Thomas. As if we would never have doubted. It’s easy to say that when we already know the end of the story, isn’t it? *Of course it’s the risen Jesus, what’s your problem, Thomas? Why do you doubt?* But here’s the thing – what’s so bad about doubt anyway? Why are we so afraid of it? Doubt is not a bad thing. It takes courage to express doubt honestly, and that’s a healthy part of being human. But it’s not always recognized as such in the church, is it?

I love the church I grew up in, and I’m forever grateful for the solid foundation in the Christian faith that church gave me. But asking questions was not exactly encouraged there, at least past a certain age. Confirmation seemed to be the only place where questions were allowed, and then the only purpose in asking was to learn and memorize the parts of the catechism with the right answers. This wasn’t a written rule or anything but it was certainly understood that that’s how things worked. After you’re confirmed, no more questions for you! We gave you all the answers you’ll ever need, thanks.

I remember my mother once calling me in a panic after a conversation she’d had with my brother. He was taking a philosophy class in college, and naturally he had a lot of questions. Deep questions. Hard questions. Good questions. So he did what any self-respecting bright young man would do – he asked his mother. And she kind of flipped out. “Why is he asking me all these things? He knows the answers! He should’ve learned all that stuff in confirmation!” I had to reassure her that asking questions is a good thing. Asking questions doesn’t discount faith, it deepens it. Questions make faith stronger, more robust, more real. Questions are the seeds from which faith is grown.

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<sup>5</sup> On screen please John 20:20.

The great theologian Karl Barth<sup>6</sup> said it like this: “Everyone who has to contend with unbelief . . . ought not to take his own unbelief too seriously. Only faith ought to be taken seriously; and if we have faith as a grain of mustard seed, that suffices.”

Here at Boone UMC we’re not afraid to ask questions. It’s one of our church values: Ask hard questions.<sup>7</sup> And we mean it. And not just during confirmation, though those kids certainly ask some great ones! You’ll hear more from our confirmands in two weeks. Asking hard questions is part of being faithful disciples. Doubt and skepticism are natural, healthy, and necessary components of vibrant faith. If your faith comes prepackaged with all the answers, is it really faith? Phillip Yancey<sup>8</sup> says it this way, “Where there is *certainty* there is no room for *faith*.”

And that’s what Jesus is after in today’s gospel lesson – faith. Since we’re talking about Doubting Thomas, it’s natural to assume that doubt is the opposite of faith. But that’s not quite right in this case. When Jesus tells Thomas to stop doubting and believe, the word used for doubt really means “unbelieving.”<sup>9</sup> Thomas, stop your unbelieving and start believing.

The difference between doubt and unbelief is important. Whenever John talks in his gospel about believing, he’s talking about abiding in Jesus. That’s what faith is – abiding in Jesus. Believing is more than just agreeing to a set of doctrinal statements. It’s more than simply knowing all the right catechism answers to the deep questions of life. That’s a cheap kind of faith, an easy kind of believing. Instead, believing in Jesus is about living in relationship. Jesus is really calling Thomas to come back into relationship with him.

Thomas’ unbelief doesn’t seem to bother Jesus. Jesus receives him with grace and acceptance. He shows up and says peace to you.<sup>10</sup> Then he turns to Thomas and says put your hands here. Jesus knows that’s what Thomas was looking for, and he offers it to him freely. There’s no judgment in Jesus’ invitation. Only grace.

Thomas finally sees with his own eyes, like the rest of the disciples had before him, and he confesses, “My Lord and my God!” This confession arises out of the experience of encountering the risen Christ. It’s deeply personal and relational – MY Lord and MY God. Thomas gives Jesus his full allegiance and devotion while at the same time recognizing Jesus as the Word made flesh, God incarnate. John’s gospel has now come full circle, and Thomas’ confession becomes a rallying creed for the early church. Doubting Thomas becomes Thomas the Confessor. Thomas the Transformed.

Where do you find yourself in Thomas’ story today? Which Thomas are you? Thomas the Brave, ready to take on the world for Jesus, even if it means sacrificing what is comfortable for unknown and dangerous territory? Are you Thomas the Truthseeker, searching for answers to difficult and sometimes overwhelming questions? Or maybe you’re Doubting Thomas this morning. You’ve heard others have seen this Jesus but you’ve yet to see him for yourself. Or it’s been a while since you’ve seen him and you’ve fallen out of relationship. Or maybe you’re Thomas the Transformed, and all you want to do is shout praises to your Lord and God for the resurrection he’s enacted in your life.

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<sup>6</sup> Quote on screen please.

<sup>7</sup> On screen please: Ask hard questions.

<sup>8</sup> Quote on screen please. From <http://www.philipyancey.com/q-and-a-topics/faith-and-doubt>

<sup>9</sup> From Karoline Lewis - [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=946](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=946)

<sup>10</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Caravaggio\\_-\\_The\\_Incredulity\\_of\\_Saint\\_Thomas.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Caravaggio_-_The_Incredulity_of_Saint_Thomas.jpg)

No matter which Thomas you are, the good news today is that Jesus wants you to believe. Jesus wants to breathe resurrection life into your relationship with him. And just like Thomas, Jesus meets you with grace. He invites you to bring your doubts, your questions, even your apathy and unbelief, and place them in the scar in his side. He offers you his nail-pierced hands, that you might touch them and believe. He offers you a chance to abide in his presence. He offers you resurrection and restoration from all manner of pain, sin, and even death.

In a moment we'll have an opportunity to encounter Jesus at his communion table. We'll have a chance to touch the wounds for ourselves as we eat the broken bread. When you receive the bread, take a moment to really feel it. Press into it all your doubts, fears, and confessions. As you dip it into the cup know that Jesus' blood covers all those problems and obliterates them. As you taste the bread and juice, may you see Jesus and be transformed by his resurrection. And having seen Jesus for yourself, may you boldly proclaim with Thomas, "My Lord and my God!" Amen.

#### Children's Blessing

Dear Jesus, thank you for this bread. Bless it and everyone who eats it. Thank you that your broken body is healed and resurrected. Heal us where we are broken and give us new life. Amen.

#### Benediction

Go as God's people, having seen the risen Lord Jesus. Rejoice, believe, and go in peace. Amen.