

Sermon: A Bit of Thomas in Us All

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, April 27, 2025)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

On this Sunday after Easter, it has become somewhat a tradition for the Christian church to grapple with the nature of doubt. The lectionary text this morning, takes us to the Gospel of John, chapter 20, to the passage commonly known as the ‘Doubting Thomas’.

Thomas, the disciple of Jesus, in my opinion, must have drawn the shorten end of the straw, to be given such a moniker, as if his entire life, his contribution to the Christian faith, is only and neatly summarized as the one who doubted the resurrection of Jesus Christ. So who is this Thomas? Let us take a closer look.

He is a, how shall I put it respectfully, a minor disciple. The Synoptic Gospels—that is Matthew, Mark and Luke—have only listed Thomas as one of the Twelve. He seems to be associated with Matthew, the tax collector, as their names often appear together.

Most information we have of Thomas comes from the Gospel of John. He is called Didymus, which means ‘the twin’, but we are not sure who was actually his twin. The first time we heard Thomas speak, is recorded in John 11:16. Upon learning of the death of their close friend Lazarus, while grieving, Thomas impulsively said, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” Of course we know how that story ended, with Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead.

The second time when Thomas is recored to have spoken, is in John 14 where Jesus was assuring the disciples that he is going to prepare a place, and return and bring them to that place himself. To such assertion, Thomas challenged Jesus in verse 5, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” The questioning of Thomas prompted Jesus to respond in what is undoubtedly one of the most important doctrinal statements uttered by the Lord that, “*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*” (John 14:6) That’s Thomas! He contributed in crystallizing who we now know of Jesus, as the Way, the only Way.

Outside of the biblical canon, two gnostic works were ascribed to Thomas: the Gospel of Thomas and the Acts of Thomas. However, both were thought of by critical scholars as written in the 2nd or 3rd century—so not authentically Thomas, so we are not going to spend more time discussing.

However, the early church history does credit Thomas as the missionary and founder of the Assyrian Church of the East, in the region of upper Mesopotamia, in the 40's A. Thomas is also known to have traveled to and evangelized parts of Southern India and maybe even China. Even now among Christian adherents, Thomas is venerated as the patron saint of India.

Yet, in the biblical witness, this well accomplished apostle is often and sadly reduced to 'Doubting Thomas'. The passage that earned him such a moniker, as was read earlier in John 20, describes a post resurrection appearance of Jesus.

Jesus came upon a room full of frightened disciples, pronounced peace, sent them out to be his witnesses and to forgive sins. There was much rejoicing, except for Thomas, who was unfortunately absent in that first encounter. So when the others told him of what they saw, Thomas doubted, and famously said, "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."

Thomas was seeking proof. He was actually applying a scientific principle of testing a hypothesis—if Jesus had actually been raised, then I want to see him, to touch him and to test him. His doubt is immensely rational, sensible, understandable, and to a certain degree admirable.

It should be noted Thomas was not the only disciple that ever doubted. Peter did too, in the story of walking on water as recorded in Matthew 14, who may have succeeded initially. But when the wind picked up and waves were crashing onto his feet, Peter began to sink, and called out to Jesus, "Lord, save me!" Yes, Jesus did save him, but chastised him as well, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

In another story, as recorded in Matthew 21, when disciples were amazed that Jesus spoke, subsequently an unfruitful fig tree withered, his reply in verse 21 was, "*Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' it will be done.*"

How about the passage in Matthew 28, also known as the 'great commission', when Jesus assured the disciples that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him, and urged them to 'go and make disciples of all nations'. The immediately context of that commissioning, as recorded in verse 17, describes the mindset of those who bore witness to the resurrected Christ, "*when they saw him, they worshipped him, but they doubted*". Doubt is very much part of faith. In some instances, a healthy dose of doubt can act as a stimulus and catalyst to faith.

Most Christians in the Reformed tradition should be familiar with the story of Martin Luther, who doubted the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, and nailed his protest, his Ninety-five Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, on October 31, 1517. (I just realized that date was Halloween, or All Hallows Eve. I wonder if Luther's doubt, his protest gave the papal authority a bit of scare?...just a silly thought.)

The doubt of Luther reformulated a number of important doctrines of the Church, including Sola Fide, of justification by faith alone, apart from works of the Law. The doubt of Luther kicked started the 16 century protestant movement, of what is now known as the Reformation.

The story of Sebastian Castellio, however, is less known. He was a French preacher and theologian who confronted John Calvin over the execution of Michael Servetus in Geneva, in 1553.

Servetus, a physician and theologian in his own right, was also a blasphemer and heretic, particularly for his repudiation of the doctrine of the trinity. He was, under Calvin's direct order, executed, in an act which Castellio strongly objected and described as a 'blatant murder'. One has to understand in 16th century Geneva, the authority of John Calvin was near absolute, and nearly universally supported.

Yet from Castellio's point of view, and writing in a pamphlet titled *Should Heretic be Persecuted?*, Castellio posited, "When Servetus fought with reason and writing, he should have been repulsed by reasons and writing". "Killing a man is not to defend a doctrine, but to kill a man", and in the concluding paragraph: "We can live together peacefully only when we control our intolerance. Even though there will always be differences of opinion from time to time, we can at any rate come to general understandings, can love one another, and can enter the bounds of peace, pending the day when we shall attain unity of faith.", concluded Castellio.

For raising such doubt in such a public way, Castellio paid a price personally and professionally. But Calvin did eventually come around to Castellio's position, and wrote in the Institute of the Christian Faith 3.17.1: "Surely, while we teach that faith ought to be certain and assured, we cannot imagine any certainty that is not tinged with doubt, or any assurance that is not assailed by some anxiety."

Coming back to Thomas, Jesus did return a week later, an entire week where disciples were rejoicing while Thomas fretted and agonized. Again, the disciples were gathering in the house, and this time Thomas was with them. Once again, Jesus appears, almost out of thin air, and said them them, "Peace be with you."

Looking towards Thomas, the disciple whom Jesus returned for. Jesus invited him, just as Thomas previously demanded, "*Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.*" (John 20:27).

Quick question: did Thomas do as invited, to put his finger in the side of Jesus? Contrary to popular depiction in medical paintings, one of which appears in this week bulletin cover, Thomas never did.

Thomas, realizing that even in doubt, the Lord has honoured him—honouring him who has little faith. In shame and as doubt dissipated, replaced by faith, Thomas then proclaimed the highest honour and acclimation ever uttered by any disciple, "My Lord and my God!". To such a transformation of doubt to faith, Jesus replied, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not see and yet have come to believe."

That pretty much all of us. We all have doubted, some are still doubting. There is a bit of Thomas in us all.

Doubt can lead us to dark places, unpleasant terrain where the Accuser, the great Deceiver dwells. The state of doubt is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind (James 1:6). Yet, the ember of faith glows, with a amazing potential to grow, if we are open to the correction of the Holy Spirit, to the Spirit working inside all of us. When we are honest with our doubt, and open to the Spirit, we may yet see the hand of Jesus, reaching out to us, to steady us and to save us from ourselves.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**