

Sermon Title: Overcoming Unbelief

Subtitle: Reframing hurtful experiences into positive motivation

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/3JPNR6-evvQ>

Our Gospel appointed for today describes an event that has forever given Thomas the nickname, “Doubting Thomas.” But actually, his surname was Didymus.¹ A word that indicates he was a twin. As some of you know, I am also a twin. As such, I have enjoyed meeting other twins and sharing experiences that we might have in common.

In most cases, due to constant comparisons, most of us have felt like we have to work extra hard to establish our unique identity. So I cannot help but wonder if Thomas needed to claim his distinctive personality by admitting how he was genuinely feeling, regardless of how unpopular his unbelief might appear to the other disciples.

I have been exposed to the whole gambit of Christian believers in my history, and some of whom have been afraid to admit any expression of unbelief for fear that it might be sinful or even jinx a hoped-for outcome to their prayers.

Unbelief can take on many expressions. Some people have doubts based on feelings and emotional dynamics. Others have doubts based on cultural pressures that esteem expressive individualism and leaves God out of the equation. Since the Enlightenment, many intellectuals desire to reserve for themselves the right to define everything—ranging from their perception of reality to their right to distinguish right from wrong and truth from error. But regardless of where a person is coming from, doubt raises for us all a gambit of legitimate concerns and questions.

In his book, *The Gift of Doubt*, Gary Parker writes, “If faith never encounters doubt, if truth never struggles with error, if good never battles with evil, how can faith know its own power?” I like Parker’s comment

¹ John 20:24

because it makes our spiritual quest in the face of doubt something relatable and achievable.

I can relate to Thomas because he had the emotional independence that gave him the boldness to put into words his true feelings. He had a temperament that needed verifiable evidence and the use of concrete terms and analogies. This tendency was evident in his conversation with Jesus the night before he died. For example, when Jesus spoke of knowing the way to the Father, Thomas responded, “*How can we know the way?*”² When Jesus said, “*Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father,*” Thomas wanted more clarification and asked, “*Show us the Father, and that will be enough for us.*”³ In these conversations, Thomas was more like a critical twenty-first-century thinker than any of the other disciples.

Then in our Gospel today, Thomas said, “*...unless I see the nail marks in his hands, and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.*”⁴ Here is a guy who is not going to pretend. If he has any questions, he will raise them, even if it requires standing alone.

So let’s look at his legitimate concerns. When Thomas reviewed the details of Christ’s suffering and death, he could not perceive how anything good could come from it. Nothing about the death of Christ on the cross seemed to make sense. It was inspired by hate, jealousy, and fear. The religious leaders manipulated the crowd, and Pilate knew that he was being asked to condemn an innocent man. Moreover, the cross was the cruelest of all executions. The Law of Moses even pronounced, “God curses him who is hanged.”⁵ So how could anything good come from such evil? How could God allow his Messiah to be overcome, defeated, and cursed? These kinds of questions shook a critically thinking man like Thomas to the core.

² John 14:5

³ John 14:8

⁴ John 20:25

⁵ Deuteronomy 21:23

In addresses some of these concerns, Canon David Sellery wrote:

“Thomas wants proof. And who can blame him? Just a short time ago, Jesus had entered Jerusalem in triumph. And Thomas found himself in the entourage of a super-star. Then suddenly, his whole world collapsed. Jesus was arrested and (nailed) upon a cross. Scared out of their minds, the disciples were on the run, (fearing) that (they) would be next on the hit list.”⁶

So Thomas was not alone in his feelings. None of the apostles had preconceived notions that Christ would be raised from the dead. When the women came back from the tomb with the news of the resurrection, the disciples thought their words were “*idle tales, and they didn’t believe them.*”⁷ They were all surprised and even shocked when Christ appeared to them. So to separate Thomas as the only one who doubted is unfair to him.

Don’t we all have trouble wrapping our minds around Christ’s victory over suffering and death? Don’t we all, at times, struggle with the idea that something good can come from the distressing circumstances we now face? We all want spiritual reality, but most of us don’t arrive at a place of confident trust without honestly asking fundamental questions and lots of them.

I like the way that Ravi Zacharias, a modern-day Christian apologist who died last year, explained faith by insisting,

*“God has put enough into this world to make faith in Him a most reasonable thing. But He has left enough out to make it impossible to live by sheer reason alone. Faith and reason must always work together in that plausible blend.”*⁸

Therefore thinking through plausible questions like those just mentioned is never easy. Thomas was honestly grieving the loss of his

⁶ Cannon David Sellery, Podcast at www.DavidSellery.org

⁷ Luke 24:18

⁸ Zacharias, Ravi. *The Logic of God*, Zondervan, p. 130

friend, and he was trying to make sense of something that didn't seem to make any sense. Yet even with his unbelief, he still needed the championship of the other disciples, with whom he disagreed.

Modern life has its harsh realities, and it can feel like a war zone. So even when we disagree with each other about important matters, we still need one another. It was this willingness of Thomas to be with others with whom he disagreed that turned out to be his saving grace. John's Gospel records, ***“Eight days 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.’”***⁹

In this encounter, Jesus refers to the exact words and objections Thomas had raised. Jesus knew Thomas's every thought and loved him with a tenderness and mercy that fully understood his critical temperament. Therefore Jesus spread before Thomas his hands that had been nailed to the cross, exposing the place where the nails were driven—the emblems of his suffering and shame.

Beholding those wounds showed Thomas in concrete terms how his Lord was willing to be broken and suffer in our place. They also conveyed how our God understands our suffering and is with us in our pain. Those wounds mean that we can never be alone in our confusion and despair.

Moreover, those wounds in his hands and side gave Thomas irrefutable proof that our Lord has ultimately overcome the worst this sinful world could do. Therefore Thomas exclaims with profound astonishment, ***“My Lord and My God.”***¹⁰ In these five simple words of allegiance, he was saying, *You are “my Lord,” and I will obey you. You are “my God,” and I will worship you.* This personal expression of

⁹ John 20:26-27

¹⁰ John 20:28

heartfelt faith resulted in a blessedness that Jesus declares comes to all ***“who have not seen me and yet have believed.”***¹¹

The poetic words of the inspirational hymn, “Crown Him with Many Crowns,” express something of the love and devotion Thomas felt:

Crown him the Lord of love;
behold his hands and side,
those wounds, yet visible above,
in beauty glorified.
All hail, Redeemer, hail!
For thou hast died for me;
thy praise and glory shall not fail
throughout eternity.

So let’s proclaim our Easter affirmation of faith boldly: Alleluia, Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Reflection Questions

- What are the relationships or circumstances in which you struggle to see anything positive or good? What experiences have you had that cause you to lean toward imagining worst-case scenarios?
- Due to Christ’s victory over death, how is God calling you to reframe some of your recent experiences where something evil has worked for good? See Romans 8:28? ***“All things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose.”***
- The “cancel culture” we live in can cause people to live in fear instead of love. In what ways has our culture hampered you from having a positive outlook on life.?
- Do your thoughts inspire you to believe you can make a difference in the world? Does your worldview s reflect your hope in Christ?

¹¹ John 20:29