

**THE RESURRECTION, FAITH AND DOUBT IN AN AGE OF SKEPTICISM  
JOHN 20:19-31**

**I. We live in a skeptical age. There are good reasons for skepticism. There are a lot of scammers in the world around us. We find them online and on the phone. The IRS just announced that it is hiring contractors in an effort to recover old tax debts. That will make it harder for some people to recognize financial scammers claiming to be from the IRS.**

**As a pastor, I have a skeptical streak. Earlier in my ministry I tended to be trusting toward people who came to me from outside of the church asking for financial help. But when I have taken the time to check out stories from such individuals, I have found out that the majority of them have made stuff up. They have lied to me. So I have come to be skeptical toward outsiders who are looking for help. It tends to take a lot of time to check out their stories. I am more inclined to give them \$20 for gas or for a meal and to send them on their way.**

**Like many of you, I also have religious skepticism. I turn on the TV and see some of the characters on religious programs making a lot of claims. Send me money and God will bless you with a physical healing or material wealth. I occasionally have people tell me that God told them to do certain things. Sometimes what they tell me goes contrary to what I see in the Bible. So I am skeptical.**

**We live in a pluralistic society, which is still quite religious. There are many religious claims that are spread about. There are different religions, and there are variations within Christianity that all want to claim our loyalty. It seems to me that a certain skepticism is warranted.**

**II. If you have a skeptical streak within you, then perhaps you can relate to the character whom we are going to consider this morning. Thomas was a good guy and a skeptic. We are going to consider first **THOMAS AND HIS BACKGROUND**.**

**Thomas was one of the twelve disciples of Jesus, but we have limited information about his background. He was Jewish, but we don't know his hometown. Most of the other disciples were from Galilee in the north of Israel. Perhaps he was from that area. A number of the other disciples were**

fishermen by trade. Perhaps Thomas was a fisherman also, but we are actually told nothing about his career background. We don't know anything about his parents or grandparents.

In the New Testament, Matthew, Mark, Luke and Acts include his name in the list of the twelve disciples that they provide. The Apostle John in the fourth book of the New Testament is the only source in the Bible who provides us with any details about him. In the Gospel of John in #11 Jesus and the twelve disciples were in the northern part of Israel when they got word that Jesus' friend Lazarus was very sick. Lazarus lived just to the east of Jerusalem. Jesus had recently been to Jerusalem with the disciples, and some of the Jewish leaders had tried to stone Him for blasphemy. But Jesus now announced that their group was headed back to the area.

Thus in v. 16 of John #11 we are told, "So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'" The name "Thomas" was an Aramaic word for "twin." Some translations of the Bible say that Thomas was called "Didymus." That is the Greek word for "twin." So perhaps Thomas had a twin brother or sister.

Then we have this one statement that he is reported to have made. On one hand it may be unfair to make too much out of this one brief statement that Thomas makes. On the other hand it may be that the author chose to record that statement because it was reflective of his perspective on life. If it was reflective of his personality, then we can see that he was a loyal guy. He was committed to Jesus. He was willing to return to Jerusalem where a bit earlier it seemed like the opposition to Jesus had reached a dangerous level.

At the same time there is a hint of pessimism about Thomas. From his perspective this trip to Jerusalem seems dangerous. They all could end up dead. Thomas is skeptical about this decision. He seems to doubt Jesus in this course of action. He lacks faith about His wisdom.

The next reference to Thomas in John's Gospel occurs in #14. Jesus and the disciples are in Jerusalem. It is the evening before His arrest and crucifixion. They are having what we know as the Last Supper. Jesus tells the disciples that He is going away to prepare a place for them. He is talking about heaven, but that is not immediately obvious to them. (JOHN 14:5) According to v. 5, "Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?'"

So Thomas, like the other disciples, still does not understand what is about to happen. Jesus has spoken of His coming resurrection and death, but that talk has gone right over their heads. They were hoping that Jesus was going to inaugurate a great kingdom and fulfill the Old Testament promises about a return of Israel to world prominence. But Thomas, at least, is humble and open enough to ask Jesus about what he does not understand. Jesus responds with words that they still do not get.

III. We are going to consider then THOMAS AND THE EVENTS OF HOLY WEEK. The last reference of any substance that we have about Thomas in the Bible occurs in regard to the resurrection of Jesus. The four New Testament Gospels record a number of incidents that happened in the preceding week. The previous Sunday is what we know as Palm Sunday. Because the Jewish feast of Passover was coming, thousands of Jewish people were beginning to show up in Jerusalem for this annual feast.

On Palm Sunday the Gospels indicate that Jesus came riding into the city on a donkey. Crowds of people, most of them perhaps Galileans, were cheering him as a hero. During the following week Jesus spoke on the Temple compound. Many of the people responded positively. But the religious leaders were becoming increasingly antagonistic. The disciples recognized that.

The disciples and Jesus celebrated the Passover meal on Thursday evening. Jesus talked to them about going away. They did not understand why He was going or where He was going. They were confused. They were tired. It was an exhausting week, and it was a long day. After the extended Passover meal, Jesus wanted a further prayer time in Gethsemane, just to the east of the city. Judas had left them to sell Jesus out to the religious leaders. Jesus asked the eleven remaining disciples to stay awake with him and pray. But they were too tired. They fell asleep.

They awoke to see Jesus being arrested by the religious leaders and their troops. The disciples were scared. They ran away. They were confused. Peter observed some of what happened in a hearing for Jesus that was held before the religious council in the home of the high priest. Later he probably told Thomas and the others about what happened. The next day, Friday, the disciples must have been overwhelmed with a mix of fear and shame and confusion and helplessness and anger and depression. Perhaps Thomas joined those who stood at a distance and watched the crucifixion of Jesus.

In the two days that followed the crucifixion, the Gospels tell us that the disciples hid out in Jerusalem, fearing that they, too, might be arrested. At the same time, they tried to make some kind of sense out of what they had seen.

Then on that Easter Sunday morning a strange and remarkable incident happened. The Apostle John tells us about it in the first part of #20 in his biographical account of the life of Jesus. If you want to follow along, it is on p.906 in the black Bibles under many of the chairs. Beginning in v. 1 of #20 we read,

1 Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. 2 So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." 3 So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. 4 Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, 7 and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. 8 Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9 for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10 Then the disciples went back to their homes.

11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. 12 And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. 13 They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." 14 Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." 16 Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"—and that he had said these things to her.

The other gospel accounts tell us that there were other women who went to the tomb with Mary Magdalene that morning. Luke's account gives us the additional information that Jesus also appeared to two followers walking on the road to Emmaus, a town west of Jerusalem.

Now in v. 19 of our passage Jesus appears to His apostles. Our translation says that the doors were locked on that Sunday evening. The disciples were afraid of the religious authorities. Then suddenly Jesus appeared in the midst of the disciples. There may have been more followers of Jesus present than just the eleven remaining apostles.

Jesus gave a typical Hebrew greeting: "Shalom. Peace be with you." Luke notes in his account that the disciples were "very frightened." They thought that they were seeing some kind of spirit or ghost. So in v. 20 of our passage it says that Jesus showed them His hands and His side. He wanted them to see the marks in His hands where He had been nailed to the cross and the wound in His side where He had been pierced by a Roman spear. He wanted them to be convinced that this was truly Jesus risen from the dead in bodily form. The disciples were indeed convinced. John says that they "were glad when they saw the Lord." There was an additional conversation that followed.

IV. Consider then **THOMAS AND HIS DOUBTS**, which are described in vv. 24 & 25. This is the source for the expression "doubting Thomas." Verse 24 tells us that Thomas was not present with the other disciples on that Easter evening. The reason for his absence is not given.

According to v. 25, "So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.'" This is just a summary of the more detailed account that they surely gave Thomas about the appearance of Jesus in their midst. Mary Magdalene probably also told Thomas about her experience with the risen Christ. Perhaps the disciples who met Jesus on the way to Emmaus also told about their encounter.

But Thomas would not accept this testimony. He was truly a follower of Jesus. He had demonstrated genuine commitment to Him. He had also seen Jesus perform miraculous deeds. He had been present when Jesus called out Lazarus from the tomb. He had good information now that the tomb where Jesus had been buried was empty. He heard testimony from his colleagues that they had seen Jesus. Jesus Himself had told the disciples that he would die and rise again.

**But Thomas would not believe. The Biblical stories of Jesus are different from fairy tales and from the stories of Roman and Greek mythology in that the main characters in the Bible have difficulty in accepting supernatural events. They are slow to accept and recognize and understand the miracles of Jesus. They were just as skeptical about claims of the supernatural as most of us are.**

**But Thomas here had a prideful stubbornness. The Greek grammar that is used in v. 25 to describe his response employs a double negative. Our translation puts it as "I will never believe." It could also be "I will certainly not believe." Thomas proceeds to set up his own criteria for belief: "I require seeing evidence and feeling evidence. That feeling evidence must be two-fold. I want to feel holes in His hands, and I want to feel a hole in His side. Then I will believe." Thomas was acting as an empiricist.**

**We human beings are often like that. We like to establish our own criteria about what is necessary to obtain our assent and trust, especially in relationship to God. Like Thomas, those criteria are often empirical. We want to be able to see and touch things. Philosopher and mathematician Bertrand Russell says, "What science cannot tell us, mankind cannot know."**

**There is truth, however, beyond the realm of science. The heart of science is the scientific method, and the heart of the scientific method is reproducibility. If you can't reproduce something, you can't verify that it is true--- scientifically.**

**History, however, cannot be subjected to the scientific method. For it is impossible to perfectly reproduce events in the past. You cannot scientifically prove that Jesus Christ rose from the dead. But neither can you subject the claim that George Washington was the first President of the United States to the scientific method. Those claims require different tests and different standards. Like Thomas, we are also inclined to set up our own criteria for what we will believe and not believe.**

**Thomas had evidence available to him that could have convinced him that Jesus had risen from the dead. He probably witnessed the death of Jesus. None of the witnesses to these events doubted that Jesus had truly died. There was not any body around that could be produced. The tomb was empty. It had been sealed and guarded. Thomas heard several eyewitness reports that Jesus had been seen and touched. These reports came from people whom he knew. Then Thomas could have considered the words of**

Jesus stored in His memory banks that made reference before the event that He was going to die and rise from the dead.

But Thomas would not believe. Why? It had been a very difficult week. Thomas had experienced terrible grief at seeing Jesus crucified. He felt guilt at not standing with Jesus at the time of His arrest and crucifixion. Thomas had a skeptical nature, and this was, after all, a unique, supernatural event. I suspect that Thomas may also have had a little anger toward Jesus. These fellow disciples all claimed that they had seen Jesus. Some of the witnesses were not even apostles. Some were even women. But he was left out.

In the end the real reasons for the unbelief of Thomas were moral and spiritual. In the end the real reasons for our unbelief, for our refusal to believe the gospel, or the promises of God, are also moral and spiritual. We have the Bible. We have the historical evidence that the claims of Christ are true. We have seen changed lives of Christians whom we know. We also may hear a voice, which the Bible calls the Holy Spirit, who is telling us that this stuff is true, and that we need to get right with God.

The root problem is often pride. We don't want to give over control of our life to somebody else. It might change our lifestyle. Philosopher Bertrand Russell, who wrote *Why I Am Not a Christian*, could not be objective. He had four different wives and multiple mistresses. To become a Christian would mean giving up a lifestyle to which he was attached.

Like Thomas, some of us may not want to trust in the claims of Jesus because we are little angry at God. Maybe we are a lot angry at God. This bad thing happened to me, or this person close to me was taken away, and I blame You for it. Such is the nature of our unbelief.

V. In vv. 26-31 of John #20 we encounter THOMAS AND HIS BELIEF. It was a week later--- the text speaks of eight days, because the Jews counted the first day as one day. The disciples were again gathered together, and Thomas was with them. The doors were locked, and Jesus again appeared suddenly in their midst. He repeated the words that He had uttered a week earlier: "Shalom. Peace be with you." Then he went to Thomas and said, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." Thomas hears Jesus offer to meet the exact demands that he had laid down.

**A little over a week earlier Thomas would not stay awake and pray with Jesus as He had requested. He had been unwilling to defend Jesus from the authorities when they came to arrest Him. Thomas was unwilling to go to the hearing before the religious leaders. He had been unwilling to support Jesus in His time of greatest agony by being with Him near the cross. But now Jesus graciously and patiently meets the selfish demands of doubting Thomas.**

**My guess is that Thomas never followed through with the touch test. The appearance of his Lord and the exact quotation of his demands was enough. Thomas answered and said, "My Lord and my God!"**

**The twelve had previously called Jesus "Lord" and "Son of God." But it was reserved for doubting Thomas to use this clear, unequivocal expression of deity. A Biblical scholar by the name of Leon Morris writes, "In the moment that he came to see that Jesus was indeed risen from the dead Thomas came to see something of what that implied. Mere men do not rise from the dead in this fashion. The one who was now so obviously alive, though he had died, could be addressed in the language of adoring worship."**

**One of the basic doctrines of the Jewish faith was, and is, that God is one. So it had been difficult for the disciples of Jesus to adjust to the idea that the one God existed in three Persons. But now it was clear to Thomas that Jesus was truly God as well as man.**

**Jesus could have corrected Thomas if he had come to the wrong conclusion. But that was the correct conclusion. And in v. 29 Jesus builds on that statement: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." Here there is a blessing promised by Jesus for us who have not seen Him upon the earth but have believed in Him.**

**VI. Consider then THOMAS AND HIS CHANGED LIFE. The Bible provides us with no further information about Thomas after this incident. We do have more traditions and reports about him in the early church than we do about any of the other original apostles, except for Peter and John. The historical evidence is that Thomas was changed as a result of his encounter with the risen Christ. The skeptic became a committed and unwavering disciple. The general testimony of history is that Thomas went on to establish churches in the area of Babylon in what is today Iraq. He continued to travel to the east and eventually settled on the southwest coast of India,**



where he reportedly baptized thousands of Christians and planted many churches. He is reported to have ended his life as a martyr for the faith, though details of his death vary. There are many churches and Christians in southwest India today that trace their spiritual roots to the apostle Thomas.

The resurrection of Jesus is a verification of the claims of Jesus concerning the meaning of His life and death. Thomas was a verifier of that resurrection. He was a skeptic who demanded empirical evidence before he would believe. But when that observable evidence was provided, he did believe, and his life was changed by Jesus Christ.

**VII. Finally, we need to consider THE RESURRECTION AND THE CHALLENGE TO OUR OWN LIVES.** In vv. 30 & 31 the author John concludes, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book, but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that by believing you may have life in his name." John has intentionally arranged the story of Thomas as the climax of this book. The recognition of skeptical Thomas that Jesus really did die and rise from the dead is intended to motivate us, his readers, to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. The declaration "My Lord and my God" from the mouth of a skeptic is the strongest proof that John can marshal to show that Jesus is the Son of God who came to die for the sins of the world.

John's goal in writing the book is to lead people to have life in Christ's name, to have eternal life. This life comes, he says, by accepting the evidence and believing in Jesus Christ--- not by doing good works, not by being good enough, not by being a church member--- but simply by believing in Jesus. Have you trusted in Him as your Savior?

There is a movie currently being shown in the theaters entitled "The Case for Christ." It is the story of a skeptic who investigated the claims of Christ. Lee Strobel was a lawyer with an Ivy League education. This is his story in his own words:

"For most of my life I was an atheist. I thought the idea of an all-loving, all-powerful creator of the universe--I thought it was stupid. I mean, my background is in journalism and law. I tend to be a skeptical person. I was the legal editor of the Chicago Tribune. So I needed evidence before I'd believe anything.

**One day my wife came up to me--she'd been agnostic--and she said after a period of spiritual investigation she had decided to become a follower of Jesus Christ. And I thought, you know, this is the worst possible news I could get. I thought she was going to turn into some sexually repressed prude who was going to spend all her time serving the poor in skid row somewhere. I thought this was the end of our marriage.**

**But in the ensuing months, I saw positive changes in her values, in her character, in the way she related to me and the children. It was winsome; and it was attractive; and it made me want to check things out. So I went to church one day, ah, mainly to see if I could get her out of this cult that she had gotten involved in.**

**But I heard the message of Jesus articulated for the first time in a way that I could understand it. That forgiveness is a free gift, and that Jesus Christ died for our sins, that we might spend eternity with Him. And I walked out saying--I was still an atheist--but also saying, "If this is true, this has huge implications for my life." And so I used my journalism training and legal training to begin an investigation into whether there was any credibility to Christianity or to any other world faith system for that matter.**

**I did that for a year and nine months until November the 8th of 1991, and on that day I realized that, in light of the torrent of evidence flowing in the direction of the truth of Christianity, it would require more faith for me to maintain my atheism than to become a Christian. Because to be an atheist I would have to swim upstream against this torrent of evidence pointing toward the truth of Jesus Christ. And I couldn't do that. I was trained in journalism and law to respond to truth. And so on that day, I received Jesus Christ as my forgiver, and as my leader.**

**And, just like with my wife, my life began to change. Over time my values, my character, the purpose of my life began to be transformed over time in a way that, as I look back, I can't imagine staying on the path I was on compared to the adventure and the fulfillment and the joy of following Jesus Christ."**

**Have you come to the point in your life where you have acknowledged Jesus Christ as your Lord and your God? God has left us with evidence of the truth of the gospel. Our responsibility is to believe it--- to place our trust in the God-man who rose from the dead after dying on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins so that we might have eternal life.**