

JOHN 11:7-12; 14-16

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble because the light is not in them."

After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." ...Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his disciples, "Let us also go that we may die with him."

JOHN 20:24-29

Thomas (who was called the Twin) one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But Thomas 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."

A week later Jesus' disciples were again in the house and Thomas was with them. Though 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." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have not seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

ACTS 1:1-5; 12-14

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when was taken up to heaven after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering, he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This”, he said, “is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”...

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter and John, James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphas, and Simon the Zealot and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

PROFILES IN COURAGE: PART 1

TRUE GRIT

John 11:7-16
John 20:24-29
Acts:1-5; 12-14

The U.S. Marine Corps is currently running a compelling television ad designed to recruit young people into its forces. You see helicopters landing on what appears to be a desert terrain and on the horizon, is a tsunami like roiling wave of smoke and dust—very ominous! And the commandos dispatch from the helicopter in full battle gear and sprint toward the Armageddon appearing tumult. And then a voice rises above the scene asking, “Which way would *you* run?” I know which way I’d run!

It is an obvious appeal to people who love to take risks, who don't consider danger as much as they see opportunity. It is quite a different recruiting approach from those posters of yesteryear featuring a portrait of Uncle Sam pointing at you and whose finger you could not get away from no matter which direction you faced. The message today is that this is not for everyone—Uncle Sam does not necessarily want *you*. But if you place loyalty to your country above fear—if you have the guts and determination—then perhaps you could make the grade.

Even though he is more famously remembered for his skepticism over the reports of Jesus' post-resurrection cameo appearance to the other disciples, I would bet that the Apostle Thomas would have been one who answered that call. He demonstrated a considerable amount of courage both during Jesus' ministry and in the ensuing post-resurrection days and years as the first followers of Jesus risked their lives to spread his message far and wide to proclaim a new age.

We have now entered the period between Easter and Pentecost which offers us an excellent opportunity to not only celebrate the lives of those who carried the faith forward, but to see what we might learn from their contributions to our religion and to our world. So today I would like to place the spotlight on Thomas, one of the original Twelve and next time to focus our attention on Mary of Madgdala then on a later disciple who was recruited by Peter as the young movement was gaining momentum—the Apostle Stephen.

Thomas does not get much face time in the synoptic gospel accounts, being mentioned by name only once in each when he is included in the roster of the original Twelve. In John, however, he receives a considerable amount of attention and he does get a shout-out by Luke in the Book of Acts. John presents him as something of a controversial character. On the one hand, he is the only disciple who did not discourage Jesus from returning to Judea to raise Lazarus from the dead. The other 11 were actually appalled that Jesus would even consider returning there after he had almost been stoned. But Thomas was of the mindset to “damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead”—sprint toward the tumult!

On the other hand, John gives him mixed reviews for the doubt he expresses when the others report that Jesus had appeared to them behind closed doors on a night Thomas had been absent. Some scholars have lauded Thomas for having the courage to demand physical evidence for this claim—no false news, please! But others say he lacked faith and the Risen Christ himself seems to chastise him when he says, *Have you believed because you have seen? Blessed are those who have not seen and have come to believe.*

But perhaps because of his initial skepticism, we can identify with Thomas. He gets caught between the physical and the metaphysical. Isn't it easier to trust what we can see and touch? But let's give credit where credit is due. Once convinced, he became one of the great missionaries of the early church employing the same courage he displayed in urging the other disciples to return with Jesus to Judea to raise up Lazarus in spite of the clear and present danger posed by such a journey.

While reliable documentation from the first century is understandably sketchy, many historians believe that with the same missionary zeal associated with early Christianity, Thomas took the gospel message east through what is now Syria and Iran and then down to southern India. Along with Mark and Paul, Thomas was one of the three main drivers of spreading the new faith throughout the known regions of the civilized world.

After landing on the shores of India, he is reported to have founded seven churches and like ten other of the original disciples, was eventually martyred, a victim of religious discrimination. Nevertheless, he preached and evangelized for 20 years before his unfortunate demise. In fact, he is said to have raised the first cross in India and to have performed there one of his first miracles. According to legend, he encountered a group of Brahmans throwing water into the air as part of a ritual and asked why the water fell back to earth if it was pleasing to their deity. "My God," Thomas boasted, "would accept such an offering." He then flung a great spray of water into the air and the droplets remained suspended in the form of glistening white blossoms. Most onlookers converted on the spot while the others fled.

It is inevitable, of course, that when we present an alternative spiritual approach to what is the popularly accepted religious practice, we are going to run into trouble. Political views and religious beliefs are rarely open to negotiation. And Thomas, possessing the courage to stand his ground in any situation, eventually—and predictably—met his fate at the point of a spear. But he left us a legacy of true grit while opening the eyes and ears of the world to the good news of Christ.

The early church did not meet an early death as did so many other religious movements throughout history. It survived and over time has drawn hundred of millions of followers because of the commitment and grit of people like Thomas. So how does his life speak to us in a much different time and place? How might we be courageous in our actions as we put our faith into motion? While we are not asked to be martyrs—we will leave that to ISIS fighters—what are more appropriate examples of true grit we can use as models?

I recently read about the inspiring action taken by former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt back in 1939 when the famous African American contralto Marian Anderson was scheduled to perform at Washington's Constitution Hall in a concert sponsored by the Daughters of the American Revolution. At the last minute, The DAR canceled the performance because Anderson was black.

When the First Lady heard of this, she was outraged, immediately resigned her membership in the DAR and arranged for Anderson to perform at the Lincoln Memorial. Seventy-five thousand people showed up, more than 20 times the number who would have heard her at Constitution Hall. Following the concert, Anderson remarked, "The minute a person whose word means a great deal dares to take the open-hearted and courageous way, many others follow."

Thomas was always willing to stand fast in the face of oppositional voices. "Not go to Judea? Come on, guys, Jesus needs us!"... "Did you fellas have a little too much wine the other night? Show me the proof!" ... "My God is generous and compassionate. My God

accepts all offerings.” He wasn’t always right; no one ever is. But he had the courage to take risks to advance the Good.

We need more of that in this era where bigotry and racism are making huge comebacks as a result of hatred based upon long held prejudices and fear based upon unsubstantiated theories. We live in a complicated age where it is easy to be afraid and even easier to be angry, but where it is increasingly difficult to be compassionate. We need to find our voices, to disclaim lies when we hear them—no matter from whom they originate—to go deep inside ourselves to discover our own grit and put it into action in the service of the Risen Christ. If we stay silent for fear of hurting someone’s feelings or being judged for our opinion, we are hiding from the divine spark within us and contributing to our own bondage. Thomas knew, as did the other disciples, that the death of Jesus was not the death of his words or his spirit. And he did not run away from the tumult; he ran toward it! Which of us is with him?

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