

Twelve Disciples Series: #12: Thomas: The Slowest to Believe
John 11:1-16 (NRSV)
By John Gill

If you spend much time on the internet or in social media, you no-doubt have come across those silly surveys you can take to “discover” something about your personality. They usually are teasers to get you to click on the survey so they can then bombard you with advertisements. I don’t tend to take those kind of surveys because I’m suspicious of their motives – however, I suppose most of them are innocent enough. They can even be fun.

If you were to google “Twelve Disciples Surveys” you would find there are similar questionnaires you can take to find out which of the Disciples of Jesus you are most like. You might like to try it sometime – it would be interesting to see what “the survey says.”

But, even without a survey, you may have already begun identifying with one or more of the disciples – that is, if you have been following the sermon series I have been preaching over the past few months. Today, we complete our series with the last of the Disciples, Thomas. While each of us may have decided which disciples we are most like, I want to suggest that you might want to wait on the final verdict - until you consider Thomas.

I purposely placed Thomas at the conclusion of our sermon series, because I believe a strong case can be made that, even if each of us identifies with one or more of the others, every one of us can identify with Thomas. In fact, as we will see, even Jesus makes the case that this is so! But I’m getting ahead of myself.

First, what do we know about Thomas?

Thomas, has a nickname given in scripture: “Didymus” – which simply means “the twin.” The Bible doesn’t mention why he had this nickname, or anything about his twin-sibling. Of course, there is another nickname poor Thomas has been shackled with by the Church – “Doubting Thomas.” As we will see, there is truth in this nickname – but not the whole truth. Thomas, the skeptic, may have been the slowest of the disciples to fully believe – but in the end, he did overcome his doubts – and eventually became a powerhouse of faith in the Early Church. Tradition tells us that Thomas became one of the greatest missionaries of the first century, traveling as far as India, establishing the Christian church there. It is said that he built a church-building in India with his own hands, and that he died for his faith when a pagan priest there stabbed him with a spear. Clearly, Thomas had overcome his doubts!

If it weren’t for the Gospel of John, we would know next-to-nothing about this disciple. The first three Gospels merely list Thomas as one of those twelve men Jesus called. That’s it. If all we had were the synoptic gospels, we wouldn’t know any more about Thomas than we do about those nearly anonymous disciples we have considered, known only by their names – completely overlooked in the stories of Jesus.

But John presents Thomas as a key player in the Gospel-drama! He makes Thomas and his journey toward faith in Christ a major theme of his Gospel. There are no less than four stories in John that feature this disciple. Clearly, John believed there was something important we should learn from Thomas's struggle with faith. Quickly, let me remind us where we find Thomas in the Gospel of John:

The first time we hear Thomas's voice is in the scripture text read just a moment ago. It is the introduction to the wonderful story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead. A message had come to Jesus from his beloved friends, Mary and Martha, who lived in the village of Bethany on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Their brother Lazarus was gravely ill, and they implored Jesus to come quickly, believing that Jesus would heal his friend. But instead of going right away, Jesus deliberately waits several days – until he is sure that his friend, Lazarus, had died.

I'm sure this was distressing to his disciples as they wondered why Jesus hadn't rushed to the aid of his friends. Was Jesus afraid for his safety, knowing that the religious leaders were plotting his death? No. Jesus had other plans – to perform a miracle that would be even more spectacular than a healing. He intended to call Lazarus to leave his tomb, raising him back to life! It would be a powerful symbolic act, foreshowing his own resurrection from a tomb only a few days later, and providing him the opportunity to declare to the world, "I am the Resurrection and the Life!"

When his confused disciples questioned him about why he had delayed, Jesus said plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I'm glad I was not there, so that you may believe..."

Did you catch that? The primary reason Jesus delayed going to Lazarus was to be able to perform such a powerful miracle "that you (that is, my disciples) may believe." Was he speaking directly to Thomas? We don't know, but it is Thomas's voice we hear in response: "Thomas... said to his fellow disciples. 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'" I wonder what was the inflection in Thomas's voice when he said that... Is this a bold and courageous statement? Is Thomas being pessimistic? Or sarcastic? We can't tell by the text.

Certainly, Jesus must have been concerned about the feeble faith of all his disciples. As we have seen in our series, they all had their struggles to believe. But the way this story is told, it seems that Jesus's main concern may have been – for Thomas. He was obviously loyal to Jesus – but he was also a skeptic and a doubter. And Jesus goes to great lengths to help Thomas turn his doubts to faith.

The second time we hear Thomas's voice is in the fourteenth chapter of John. This is that very familiar passage we often hear read during funerals, where Jesus says that – he is going to "prepare a place for (us), that where (he) is, we might be also." And you'll recall that it was Thomas who replied to Jesus, "Lord we do not know where you were going, how can we know the way?" And Jesus responded with the wonderful words, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Then he goes on to explain to Thomas, "No one comes to the Father except through me. If

you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on, you do know him, and have seen him.”

But it's clear that Thomas isn't convinced by Jesus's words – for in the next story featuring Thomas, it's clear that Thomas still doesn't “know” who Jesus is - He doesn't yet “see” Jesus with the eyes of faith.

Let's give Thomas some credit, though. At least he was honest about his confusion and his doubt. And, I think it is worth noticing that Jesus doesn't reprimand Thomas for his question. He simply states the truth for Thomas and the others to wrestle with. And, we can assume that Thomas did wrestle with them – that he pondered the meaning of these words. But, it's clear from the Gospel of John, that he has yet to comprehend them.

The third episode in John's Gospel that features Thomas is probably the most famous – and the one that no-doubt gave Thomas his unfortunate nickname.

In the twentieth chapter, John tells us that, on the evening of Easter, the Risen Christ made an appearance in the Upper Room to all the disciples – all except Thomas, who for some reason, was not present (and of course, Judas, who had killed himself). Where was Thomas? Was he so discouraged by the death of Jesus that he was withdrawing from the group? Was he grieving alone? We don't know.

But his absence seems to be the key to the meaning of the story. When Thomas does finally show up and is told by the others that the Risen Christ had appeared to them, Thomas famously says that, “Unless I see the marks of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the marks of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” Thomas, the skeptic, needs to see the evidence. For him, “seeing is believing.” In that way he may be the most modern of the disciples – like many of us, needing “proof” in order to believe. Maybe that's why we can identify so readily with Thomas – because we would have said the exact same thing!

But a week later, as all eleven were together (this time, including Thomas), Jesus makes a return visit – specifically for Thomas's benefit. And finally - FINALLY, Thomas believes! He falls to his knees, and declares, “My Lord and my God!”

The final time Thomas is mentioned in John's Gospel is in the twenty-first chapter, when a group of the disciples have gone back to fishing on the Sea of Galilee, and had caught nothing - and Christ appears again to them, calling to them from the shoreline, to “Cast (their) nets on the other side of the boat,” – and the catch was so large they could barely drag it to shore.

Thomas now has no doubts. Jesus had made sure of that. And the point of all these stories about Thomas is summed up by Jesus, when he says to Thomas (and through the pen of John, to us), “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Do you see what I mean? Some of us may see ourselves in Peter, or Andrew, or John. Others may see themselves reflected in the lives of Thaddeus, or Nathaniel, or Matthew. But all of us can recognize ourselves in Thomas – for we are the ones who must believe without seeing. Jesus is talking about you. And me.

“Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe.”

Friend, are you a skeptic by nature? Do you find yourself drawn to Jesus, but can't quite bring yourself to believe Jesus's words, that “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me,” – that, “I am the Resurrection and the life?” – that “When you have seen me you have seen the Father?”

Maybe you don't recognize yourself in Thomas's doubts, - but I confess that, throughout my life, I have often struggled with doubts – and sometimes I still do. And when those nagging doubts begin to creep back into my brain, I return again and again to these stories of Thomas, and I take heart. That's because, for us skeptics, there is Good News to be found in these stories of Thomas. And what is that Good News? It is simply this:

Jesus always met Thomas at the point of his need, and then gently guided him toward faith. That means that we can be honest with God about our own doubts and questions. He understands our struggles to believe, and is willing to do whatever it takes to help us strengthen our faith - so that eventually we can fall to our knees and say, along with Thomas, “My Lord and my God!”

Amen.

The author of the Book of Hebrews could have been speaking directly to Thomas when he wrote these wise words (11:1); “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” With the conviction of our faith in Jesus as Lord and God, let us pray:

Lord Jesus, this morning we confess that, too often, we are like Thomas, skeptics seeking proof - before we will believe, slow to comprehend and accept that you are who you say you are. Forgive us, Lord, for doubting you.

Gracious God, we are thankful that you don't hold our doubts against us, but that you understand our struggles with faith, our questions and our doubts, and that you have promised always to meet us at the point of our need, to gently teach us once more, and then guide us toward faith.

Lord, if there are those listening to this message and prayer this morning who are still struggling with questions and doubts about what they believe, I pray that your Holy Spirit might fall upon

them today. Fill them with your love so that they might have their eyes-of-faith opened, and know the joy of proclaiming, along with Thomas, "My Lord and My God!"
Amen.