

Doubting Thomas

John 20:19-31

Every Year this Sunday we have Doubting Thomas. Everybody likes Doubting Thomas. Thomas the Apostle and the Twin, but it's that "Doubting" that says he's my kind of a guy. I understand that because after all, doubting is what it's about. How do you know? When we ask ourselves: Why, of the apostles and the early church, is Thomas so well known and so favored? What's happening here? What is this Doubting Thomas about?

In our day, well, who knows what's true? Look at all the different religions. There are five major religions and who knows how many more. There are 330 million gods in Hinduism. There are 40,000 denominations of Christianity, although 90% of Christians are found in seven denominations. There are as many divisions in Buddhism as in Christianity. Islam, which is very different, is a battle between two kinds of Muslims. Not to speak of Judaism, which is all over the place.

The same is true for world views. They're all over the place. There are different world views everywhere. If you happen to go into psychology, it has as many schools as there are Christian denominations. The same is true in philosophy. There are all kinds of points of view, a cafeteria of options. How do you know what to believe and who to believe?

"You know, God, if you wanted me to believe in you as God and hold you as God, you would make it clear to me. So God, it's your fault. It's your fault because it is not convincing and it's not clear, and because it's your fault, I'm excused, I'm a victim. I'm excused from whatever I believe and do because, after all, God, you didn't make it convincing to me. You didn't make it convincing in whichever way I say that you have to be convincing."

It was the same in the First Century, absolutely identical in the time of Christ. Some say that there's a new religion in California every week. In the First Century there was a different religion on every street corner. How do know who and what to follow? Give an offering here. Put a sacrifice there. Say yes to this one. No to that. In historical records there are six different messiahs known in the First Century. Not just Jesus, but five others, and probably more. There were all kinds of those claiming to be messiahs.

And there were all kinds of philosophies, sophisticated philosophies. It was just as bewildering then as it is today. The only real difference is that there is a change in technology.

Let's for the moment pretend that you could be Doubting Thomas. Let's just for once say that the reason we like Thomas is that he had his own private miracle. Instead of doubting he believed because he had that private miracle. And if only we could have a private miracle, we'd believe, too.

But let's look again at the First Century as if you were Doubting Thomas. You know what it says: "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe" (John 20:25), and then it concludes where he confesses: "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28).

What was really going on? In the First Century they knew all about visions and all about dreams. In the Bible we know about dreams from Joseph (Genesis 37:1-44:9), and how Daniel had to interpret dreams (Daniel 2:1-49). They knew about false dreams, delusions, and hallucinations. They even knew about catatonia, a disorder in which someone becomes stiff and unresponsive, as if the person is dead (Matt 28:4).

They knew about magic tricks, false fronts, and deception. After all, it's the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 11:14, who writes: "Remember, even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light."

They knew about myths, fables, and all kinds of things that are made up. What was it that was really the case with Thomas? Thomas was no different than all the others to whom Jesus appeared. Just look at the same chapter a little bit earlier in the story about Mary Magdalene in the garden. How did she know him? She didn't recognize him. She thought he was a gardener. Then she knew him through his word.

When we go to the next chapter, John 21, where the disciples are fishing, how did they know him? They knew him by his word and by eating together with him.

After the resurrection in the account of two disciples walking on the Road to Emmaus, a stranger joined them, they walked with him half the day and did not know him, they talked with him, and then it says: "They knew him in the breaking of the bread."

The way the Lord comes then and now is through his word and sacraments. It was true for Thomas as well as the rest because we do not choose God; God chooses us. This is stated again and again, especially in the Gospel of John:

- John 1:13: His own are those "who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." In other words, not by our decision, our experience.
- John 6:44: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him."
- John 6:65: "No one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father."
- John 15:16: "You did not choose me, but I chose you."

Recall also what Luke-Acts says about those to whom Jesus appeared in the forty days between the resurrection and the ascension. Acts 10:41 states: "He only appeared to those who were chosen to witness to him." What does that mean? It means: Thank God! It doesn't depend on me. It is outside of us, in spite of us, and therefore it certain, because if it

depended on me, on anything in me, faced as I am with death and evil, who knows? But because it depends on what he does, it is certain.

And what does Paul say? We know well 1 Corinthians 1:24-25 (paraphrase): "Jews seek miracles and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified." For those who say: "I've got to have my own little private miracle," what Paul says is an offense, a scandal. And to those who say: "It has to be convincing," what Paul says is foolishness. What Paul says is that salvation is through the cross and resurrection, which is what the Lord does. It doesn't depend on us. We can praise the Lord because there is a future and life in him. Amen