

## **I Met Jesus: Thomas**

### **John 20:24-31**

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Our teaching series this year is entitled, *I Met Jesus*. We have looked at a long cast of people from the gospel of John who met Jesus in the course of their lives. We have simply asked, *what difference did that encounter make?* For many, it meant salvation and a dramatic change. Nicodemus was a religious aristocrat very concerned with his public image. After meeting Jesus, he personally takes Jesus down from the cross for burial in full view of Jerusalem. The two sisters, Mary and Martha, were typical sisters that loved each other, but harbored a few jealousies. They met Jesus, became friends with him, and watched with their own eyes as he raised their brother Lazarus from the dead. What does that do to you? The Blind Man. The Paralytic Man. Peter denies Jesus three times, but in the end finds grace and restoration from Christ. There were many others, and their encounters with the Son of God changed them in dramatic ways.

Then there were others who met Jesus and those encounters were negatively transformational. The Roman governor Pilate who met Jesus, bowed to political pressure and signed off on his crucifixion. Judas Iscariot, who spent three years with Jesus, heard all his teaching and saw all the miracles and betrayed him to his death for the small sum of 30 pieces of silver.

As many of you know, I am an avid golf fan and this weekend is the Masters Golf tournament. It's my favorite tournament of the year and it's a course that is on my bucket list to play before I die. Most would consider it the greatest golf course in the world. Why? For a golfer, it reveals who you are. You can't play it and hide. It forces you to make all the shots which the local municipal course and your favorite putt-putt never will.

In the gospels, meeting Jesus was like that. He revealed who people really were. Their fears. Their faith. Their failures. All these biblical characters represent us as well. We are introduced to Jesus and his message in church, or through a friend, or reading the Bible. He reveals who we really are – Peter or Pilate. John or Judas. True follower or pretender.

Today we have another example before us. Some of us are going to really like this guy. Any skeptical types here? You won't raise your hand because you're skeptical of why I ask. *What's his angle? The fact that he knows what I'm thinking tells me he's up to something. These other people are gullible, but not me. No siree, not me. We'll just see what game he's playing.*

For the pessimist, the cup doesn't merely appear to be half-empty, it *is* half-empty and only a dreamer would think otherwise. Skeptics take it slow in relationships assuming the other person has a hidden agenda. Know anyone like this? Might you be the person others are thinking of? For our pessimists, this guy is your patron saint. His name was Thomas.

### **Who Was Thomas?**

We don't have much background on Thomas, but here's what we know:

## He was a twin

This may seem like an odd thing to be highlighted. Scripture not only mentions it, but repeats it. Being a twin may not seem like a big deal to the non-twins here, but that's because the non-twins have never been a twin. Anybody a twin here? As I understand it, if you are a twin, that experience is big deal and is a part of your self-identity. How can it not be? Everywhere you go there's someone also there who is the exact same age as you, has the same DNA as you, and in the case of identical twins, looks exactly like you.

That was Thomas. He was well known for being a twin. He was called Thomas the Twin. I know some kids here just got excited because you thought I said, *Thomas The Twain*.

## He was a hand-picked member of Jesus' inner circle

*"And when day came, he called his disciples and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles: Simon, whom he named Peter, and Andrew his brother, and James and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and **Thomas**, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon who was called the Zealot, and Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor."* (Luke 6:13-16, emphasis added)

This means he lived and travelled with Jesus for most of the three years of Jesus' public ministry. Thomas saw the miracles, was in the boat when Jesus calmed the raging sea, saw him walk on water, was standing at the tomb as Lazarus was resurrected, and on and on we can go. He experienced tremendous privileges with Jesus. He saw it all.

## Thomas was a pessimist, but he came to truly believe Jesus was the Messiah

The little glimpses we get of Thomas (John 11:15-16; 14:4-5; 20:24-29) all indicate that Thomas was that guy in the room who saw himself as the realist. He wasn't a leader like Peter and not a traitor like Judas. He was the realist who prided himself on saying what needed to be said. One example is in John 11 when Jesus announces he's going to Jerusalem. What does Thomas say? *"So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'*" (John 11:16)

Thomas, that's the spirit! That will inspire people. He assumes the worst case scenario, *Guys, let's go and die*. Another way to read this is that he actually does show some courage. *We may die, but let's go with him anyway*. He is pessimistic about the possibilities, but he is a loyal pessimist. There are some things to like about this guy, don't you think? All this gives background to what Thomas is most famous for. Here's what happened:

## The Story of Thomas (John 20:19ff.)

The back story here is that Thomas was in the Upper Room with Jesus on Thursday night of his passion week. Jesus washed Thomas' feet along with the others. He saw Jesus say something to Judas Iscariot and saw Judas leave quickly. Thomas ate the Passover meal with Jesus. Later that night he, along with Jesus and the other disciples, walked to the Garden of Gethsemane. He was tired and he fell asleep while Jesus prayed alone. Suddenly he was awakened by commotion. A large group of Roman soldiers arrived at Gethsemane led by a fellow disciple, Judas Iscariot. There was a little scrum and Jesus was arrested. The disciples were in shock. What should they do? They did what came natural to them. They were afraid. They ran away as fast as they could. Thomas ran. The events of Jesus' condemnation to death unfolded throughout the night. The religious leaders falsely accused Jesus of capital crimes to the Roman governor Pilate. Pilate eventually bowed to the political

pressure and agreed to crucify him. Jesus was flogged and beaten, and he carried his cross to Golgotha. He was crucified between two criminals. Where is Thomas during all this? We don't know. He's nowhere to be found in the story. Peter and John followed; Thomas didn't. Several stayed near Jesus during his crucifixion; Thomas apparently didn't.

As Jesus hung dying on the cross, God laid on him the guilt of our sins. He agonized, as in his soul he experienced guilt and relational brokenness with God the Father. *He had never sinned, but he was dying for sins.* At 3:00 on that Friday afternoon, Jesus died. Some of his followers took his body down from the cross and he was buried before 6:00 that night in a nearby tomb. Where's Thomas? Others were there. He's nowhere to be seen.

All day Saturday passed. At first light on Sunday morning, suddenly there was an earthquake. The stone in front of Jesus' tomb was cast aside. Some women were at the tomb and one claimed she saw Jesus alive and that he spoke to her. Peter and John investigated and saw that the tomb was empty. Some other disciples claimed Jesus walked with them and even ate with them. Word was spreading like wildfire that something had happened; something potentially wonderful. Nobody knows what to make of it. A call goes out to Jesus' disciples, *Come quickly to the Upper Room! Something's happened.*

*"On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord."* (John 20:19-20)

Most of us came here today knowing and believing that Jesus was resurrected and are here to celebrate it. That first Easter Sunday, they didn't know it. In fact, the disciples' incredulity on Sunday is a strong argument that it really happened. There was no collusion or conspiracy. Jesus' resurrection was the last thing even those close to him were expecting. Can you see the mayhem among them in the Upper Room? *What have you heard? Some who had seen him tell their story. What about you? What does this mean? What is happening?* All of a sudden, there stands Jesus in their midst. *Hey.* Imagine the shock. Luke says at first they were terrified. But then their fears gave way to joy. *Jesus, is it you? Is it really you? You died! How are you alive?*

*"Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came."* (John 20:24) Why do you suppose Thomas would be the one disciple NOT gathered with the others in the Upper Room? Why would the pessimistic realist not show up? I think if you could ask Thomas it would be simple. *Jesus is dead. He's gone. It was all about him and now that he's dead, what's the point?* Thomas may have had the best theology of all of them. He realized how the whole Jesus movement collapsed the moment Jesus died. *Why keep pretending like he's still here?* I read this week about Queen Victoria of England. After her husband Albert died, she insisted that each morning his clothes were put out, his bathtub was filled, and his breakfast was served. What was she doing? She was pretending Albert was still alive. Thomas may have seen the disciples in the same way. Pretenders.

Can you see how this played out? One of the other disciples comes running up to Thomas out of breath, *Thomas, have you heard? There have been sightings of Jesus alive. We don't know what to make of it but Peter's called for all of us disciples to meet in the Upper Room ASAP. Quick, let's go!*

Thomas processes this news through the pain of Thursday night and Friday. Have you ever believed in somebody and they didn't turn out to be the person you thought they were? This is especially true for someone who is slow to trust anyone. Thomas had truly bought in to

Jesus as Messiah. He gave him three years of his life. After seeing the miracles and watching Jesus up close in the day-to-day, he was totally in. *This guy is legit. He's the Messiah.*

When Jesus died, Thomas said to himself, *Thomas, you are such a fool. How did you let yourself be duped? Mark my words, I will never be fooled again.* The reason he wasn't at the cross and he wasn't at the tomb was that Thomas emotionally retreated. He became more a cynic of religion and people than ever before.

Maybe your story has some similarities. Perhaps it's a small miracle that you even walked in to a church today because coming here reminds you of sometime in your past when you used to believe in something. It used to be very important to you. But then something happened, something painful and disappointing and you determined you would never be duped again.

Then you can relate to Thomas and his profound skepticism on Easter Sunday at the chatter about Jesus being alive. *Go to the Upper Room? I don't think so. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me. You guys go ahead and play your little pretend-he's-alive game, but I won't let myself be hurt again.* Sound familiar?

After Jesus appears to the others, "...the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, 'Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.'" (John 20:25)

Can you hear the determination of Thomas' pessimism? *Unless my conditions are met, I will never believe!* The other disciples say, "Thomas, we're telling you, it's him! We've seen him!"

"I don't think so."

"Really, it is Jesus."

"Mark my words, unless I put my finger where they nailed him to the cross and my hand where they stabbed him with the spear, I will never believe."

Interesting isn't it, that Thomas would put identification as his must-have? Why would that have been most important to a twin? Maybe because he dealt with mistaken identity all his life. It happened hundreds of times to him. *But if I see a man that looks like Jesus AND his hands have the nail holes and his side has the spear hole, then and only then will I believe.*

Here is where Thomas is so helpful because he represents so many who have a disinclination to believe. They look at the claims of Christ. They attend a church service or are friends with a Christian, and they think, *There ain't no way. I can't believe that stuff.* Just like Thomas, *Resurrection?* (guffaw) If Jesus suddenly showed up here in this room, alive and well, this sermon gets a lot easier, doesn't it? What would the skeptics say then? Here's what it did to Thomas,

*"Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, 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; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' (John 20:26-28)*

The next Sunday (Eight days as the Jews reckoned days), Thomas is with them. Perhaps their insistence had him intrigued enough to join them. The doors are locked and once

again, suddenly Jesus is there. *Peace be with you.* We're not told what the other disciples did or said but it's not hard to see it, is it? They looked at Jesus and then who did they look at? Thomas (with smirks and finger pointing).

Then Jesus speaks and we see in his world the correlation to Thomas' demands. *Come and touch my hands. Come and touch my side. See that it really is me. I am very much alive.*

Don't you think down in his heart, Thomas wanted to believe he was alive? Here today, isn't it true that even if you don't believe in Jesus' resurrection, wouldn't you want it to be true? Wouldn't it mean that this world isn't all there is; that there really is a God and Jesus really is a Savior; that there truly is hope for eternal living beyond our impending deaths?

If Jesus was suddenly standing here before us, holding out his hands for investigation, what would it mean? It means that he wants Thomas types to believe in him as Savior and Lord. Jesus condescends to Thomas' demands out of love and a desire for Thomas to receive forgiveness and the gift of eternal life through him. What does that look and sound like? Look at Thomas' confession.

### **The Confession of Thomas - *My Lord and My God!***

The confession of Thomas is the highlight in the whole gospel of John and it is intended to be a picture of his central theme of faith and belief. In fact, John 20:31 says, "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."

This really is the bottom line of all bottom lines: was Jesus resurrected or not? His resurrection is the ultimate watershed. If he wasn't resurrected, then he was a fine man who said and did some nice things. Rest in peace. But if he was resurrected, then he is sovereign Lord and God. Thomas realizes in that moment who Jesus really is. God is his character. Lord is his relationship to me. Do you hear the personal expression? MY Lord and MY God!

There it is. That is the difference between religion that doesn't save and the kind of faith that does. Religion nods the head to truth; generally acknowledges it; thinks it's nice and helpful. But Thomas shows us what real saving faith looks like. When I am convinced by faith that Jesus died for my sins and was resurrected for my salvation, I personalize it. I really believe it. Jesus is not just *the* Savior, but *my* Savior. He is not just *a* Lord, but *my* Lord. That's my story.

All of us need to personalize it. Look to an unlikely example of the kind of faith that saves. I urge you to follow this path from skepticism to genuine faith and followership of Jesus. Listen to Romans 10:9, "*If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*" (Romans 10:9) History tells us that Thomas took the gospel to India and died there as a martyr. Meeting Jesus alive changed Thomas forever.

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