

A New Nickname for Thomas
John 20:24-31

Doubting Thomas. What a loser. What a zero. What a poor excuse for a disciple. I'm so happy he existed, because this loser makes me feel better about myself. It's always so satisfying to identify the goat and then condemn the goat for being a goat.

We like to label people, don't we. Imus: most evil man in America... a racist! Except that he highlighted the plight of black Americans after Katrina and hosts a camp for underprivileged children. Lacrosse players: last year thugs and hooligans. Now, choir boys!

And Thomas. Doubting Thomas.

Thomas? Why, he just about ruined Easter for everybody. Imagine doubting after all that happened on Easter. What a loser.

The only problem is, that's not exactly how the Bible tells it. We're so quick to condemn Doubting Thomas we forget the rest. Let's look at what's going on.

Well, what about Thomas? There are two other times in which he speaks in the Gospels. Remember the Lazarus

story? What we forget is that Jesus' life has been in danger. In fact some folks had tried to stone him. For safety's sake, Jesus and the disciples are about to leave the area, when word comes that Lazarus has died, has fallen asleep. Jesus says, *"I'm going to him, to wake him up,"* that is to bring him back to life. But going there means going back into danger, and so the other disciples shrug it off: *"Well, if he's asleep, he'll wake up on his own."*

Jesus says, no, he's dead. Let's go to him. And reading between the lines, you realize that the disciples aren't falling all over themselves to hurry on over there. But look who speaks up! Thomas. Thomas fully expects that if they go to where Lazarus is, they will all be killed, but this is what he says, *Let us also go, that we may die with him."* *Doubting Thomas? How about Daring Thomas, perhaps?*

Thomas would rather die following Jesus than live without him. If we're going to talk about Thomas, let's also talk about this. Do I have that kind of faith? Do you? Did the other disciples?

Second glance at Thomas. *"JN 14:1 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. ² In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be*

with me that you also may be where I am. 4 You know the way to the place where I am going."

*JN 14:5 **Thomas** said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"*

JN 14:6 Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. 7 If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."

Now, here, Thomas isn't maybe the brightest bulb in the drawer. He doesn't understand what Jesus is saying about eternal life and Jesus preparing a place for us in heaven. But notice, Thomas speaks for all of them, all the disciples. None of them understand, but only Thomas has the courage to admit it. Only Thomas dares to expose his ignorance for the sake of growing in his faith, for the sake of understanding Jesus' teaching, for the sake of walking more closely with the Lord.

The others were just going to let Jesus' words hang there, without trying to understand. Thomas requests, "Lord, explain, for we don't understand." Doubting Thomas? How about Driven Thomas, driven to understand more about Jesus?

Imagine. A disciple brave enough to die with Jesus. A disciple wanting to soak in and understand every word from Jesus. Pretty good traits for a disciple, I would say.

Thomas is told Jesus has appeared to others, but doesn't believe it. Who does that sound like? **Every other disciple**. They have been told, but to them it had seemed like an idle tale. And while John doesn't use these words, in 20:18, if we had read that, we would find that Mary Magdalene had said, "I have seen the Lord," but there is no reaction reported from the disciples. They don't rejoice until Jesus actually appears to them as well.

And while we're talking about this, the disciples are overjoyed to see Jesus. He had offered them the Spirit, and had said, "*As the father has sent me, I am sending you.*" And now here it is a week later, and the disciples show know signs of having been sent anywhere. They're still in the same place. Having seen the Lord has certainly made a big difference to them, hasn't it?

So, when the disciples had told Thomas they had seen the Lord, and he had said, "I've got to see it with my own eyes, put my fingers in his wounds for myself," he was wanting the same proof the other disciples had received, nothing more, nothing less.

So here we are talking about Doubting Thomas, but he's done nothing different from the rest of the disciples.

And now a week later, here they are in the same place, and look what happens. Jesus suddenly appears, and before Thomas can say anything, JESUS GIVES HIM WHAT HE NEEDS SO THAT HE CAN BELIEVE. See my hands, my wounds. Touch them and know that I am alive.

We could argue that if Thomas had been a little more believing, he wouldn't have needed this extra assurance. Maybe so. But isn't the more important point this: not what Thomas lacks in faith, but what Jesus offers Thomas so that Thomas can believe.

And then we come to the very heart of the story, one we overlook because we're too busy pointing fingers at Doubting Thomas, this zero of a disciple.

Because now Thomas becomes the first man in history to make a truly appropriate response to Jesus. Jesus has been called Lord. And rabbi. And prophet. And Christ. And Son of God. And Son of Man. Even the Holy One of God. Even Mary Magdalene, encountering the Risen Lord, can only manage to call him Rabboni, teacher.

But only now Thomas says to the Risen Christ: My Lord and My God. Doubting Thomas? How about Discerning Thomas?

Instead of centering our thoughts on Doubting Thomas, why don't we center our thoughts on this: what it means to call the Risen Christ Lord and God?

Why don't we ask what does it mean to take seriously the Lordship of Jesus? Because let's face it, it's really much more fun to point out the failures of Doubting Thomas and other less than perfect disciples, rather than to look inward at ourselves. For instance, when we lose a baseball game, it is always easier to blame the umpire for a call in the fourth inning than to accept responsibility for the ball that went through your legs in the fifth, which probably took a bad hop anyway.

My Lord and My God. That's the center of this story. The Risen Christ gives to Thomas what Thomas needs so he can believe, and Thomas is the first disciple to make an appropriate response: Jesus not as teacher or master, but as God, as the very center of his life.

I find it interesting that the other disciples received the same proof, if you will, that Thomas did, seeing the Risen Lord with nail-scarred hands and wounded side. But it was

only Thomas who found the proof sufficient to proclaim Jesus as Lord and God.

Now, something else that is kind of subtle in English, but crystal clear in the Greek: when Jesus says, don't be unbelieving (the more accurate translation of doubting), but believing, he is using the present tense, which denotes ongoing action. Belief in Jesus is not a one-time decision, a declaration of faith which is then put on the shelf; rather, it is an on-going, everyday reality.

Claim Jesus as Lord and God, not just once, but every day, when you wake up, when you take the kids to school, when you talk to your wife, when you go to work, when you hit the golf course, when you sing in the choir or paint the sanctuary or come to worship or go out to eat, when you form an opinion about politics or race or poverty, live as if Jesus is your Lord and your God. Live, act, respond, as if Jesus is Lord and God. This is the invitation, this is the demand, that Jesus places upon those who would follow him.

So, here we are. Doubting Thomas. But I wonder, why is this the title we are so quick to give him? Why do we concentrate on his perceived failure, and ignore his courage, his insight? Why do we find it so much easier to dismiss him with a dubious title, and so quickly overlook

his stunning response to the Risen Christ: My Lord and My God?

Now, there is comfort in knowing that Jesus loves Thomas, even in the midst of Thomas' doubt. There's something to be said for reminding ourselves that Jesus remains faithful to us even during our times of doubt or lack of understanding.

But I think the passage is really about something else. I think it's about Jesus' coming again to us again and reminding us again of his sacrifice, his presence, his power.

And I think this passage is written for us not to concentrate on Thomas and his doubt, but Thomas and his faith. This passage leads us again to look at ourselves, and to ask ourselves daily: Where does our Easter faith come out?

May we be as courageous as Thomas. May we have the faith to rise above our doubts, and with him, proclaim about Jesus, "My Lord and My God," and then to live out this truth, in our thoughts, our opinions, our actions, our witness. Amen.