

Down through the centuries, the Church's view of the apostle Thomas has not been very complimentary. As a result of the events recorded in today's Gospel, this disciple of Jesus came to be known as Doubting Thomas.

The New Testament actually gives us very little information about Thomas. In Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Acts, Thomas is mentioned only one time in each book's lists of the apostles. Everything else the Bible tells us about Thomas comes from John's Gospel. In three places where John mentions Thomas, one of them being today's reading, we learn that Thomas was called Didymus, which is Greek for "the Twin." The name Thomas itself means twin in Aramaic, the language that Jesus and his disciples spoke. So it seems likely that neither Thomas nor Didymus was his real name, but that each was a nickname for "Twin" in different languages. "Some Syriac Christians knew him as Judas - Judas Thomas (Judas the twin)."¹ Was Thomas an actual twin and, if so, of whom? We don't know. Yet another possibility is that Thomas bore a physical resemblance to Jesus, and so this became the source of the nickname. If Judas were his given name, this would prevent confusing him with Judas Iscariot, or yet another one of the Twelve named Judas who is identified in Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. The Acts of Thomas is an imaginative and rather far-fetched work from the early third century that describes the exploits of Thomas in India. "It is startling to find that in the Acts of Thomas, Judas Thomas is regarded as the twin of our Lord himself."² Unlike Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Acts, John's Gospel gives us some sense of the character and personality of Thomas. We first meet him in the eleventh chapter in a reading we heard just three weeks ago. Word had reached Jesus that his friend Lazarus was ill. A few days later, Jesus proposed going to visit Lazarus with his disciples - they questioned the wisdom of doing this out of concern for his personal safety. Jesus, however, decided to go ahead with the visit anyway. Thomas said, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

The response of Thomas can be interpreted in at least two ways. Maybe he was being sarcastic and critical of the idea of going to see Lazarus. But it seems more likely that Thomas was expressing a courageous loyalty and willingness to go with Jesus, even if it meant losing his own life.

We meet Thomas the second time in this Gospel in the fourteenth chapter in a

¹ E.P. Blair in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Volume 4* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), p. 632.

² *Ibid.*

reading frequently heard at funerals. It is part of what is often referred to as the Farewell Discourse of Jesus. Jesus has explained to his disciples that when he goes away, he will be returning to God the Father. He also wants to make it clear to his friends that he will prepare a place for them there. He adds, "And you know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas points out the obvious: "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" From this exchange we see that Thomas was not afraid to stick his neck out and ask a question when he didn't understand what was being said. He spoke with respect for Jesus as well, calling him Lord.

So Thomas comes across in these two passages as being more of a questioner than a doubter or disbeliever. He appears to be a sincere and earnest follower of Jesus; also, if he's not sure about how to go about doing that, he'll ask. Already John has portrayed Thomas as being practical, concrete, frank, and courageous.

John's third episode involving Thomas is in today's Gospel. Thomas had missed out on the first encounter Jesus had with the disciples on the day of his resurrection. When the others told him they had seen Jesus, Thomas replied, "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 visits the disciples again; this time, Thomas is with them. Jesus greets them, "Peace be with you." He has a special message for Thomas, inviting him to touch his wounds. Seeing Jesus and hearing his words appear to have been sufficient evidence for Thomas. He may not have required as much proof of Jesus' resurrection as he had said, for the Gospel story gives no report of Thomas actually touching the wounds of Jesus. But it does tell us of his verbal response: "My Lord and my God!" Jesus then says, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Thomas seems to have received a bit of a scolding from Jesus, doesn't he? Since faith in Jesus' resurrection is the benchmark for what it means to be a Christian, Thomas doesn't come off looking very good here. But for us to assume this means it is wrong to doubt or to question such things is probably going too far.

To Thomas' credit, an unexamined faith will not match the power of an inquisitive one. It takes honest, straightforward questioning to nurture a sturdy, genuine, and vital faith. Doubt and faith are not incompatible

opposites.

Back in the late 1960s when I was in high school, one of my heroes was a local Lutheran pastor who was active in the Civil Rights movement. Pastor Setzer had a Ph.D. from Duke. He had authored a book, *What's Left to Believe?* In it, he wrote: "...doubt is a growing pain of faith. For in a real sense faith is a spiritual muscle which can be strengthened and enlarged only by exercise. And the weights that exercise the muscle of faith are doubt and trouble and opportunity."³

If Thomas is a doubter, then the world needs more of them rather than fewer - more people who will dare to ask tough and important questions. We wouldn't be here in a Lutheran church today were it not for a Catholic monk who five centuries ago questioned the theological assumptions implied in the buying and selling of indulgences. Luther believed the trade in indulgences violated St. Paul's teaching that God gives us salvation by the grace of Christ - which we receive through faith. As a result, a movement took root within Western Christianity that opened the way for reform in many other areas of church life.

Jesus himself questioned some of the religious traditions of his time. Many contemporary religious leaders taught that it was wrong to heal on the Sabbath because healing was work, and work was forbidden on this holy day of rest. Jesus did not agree. He said God made the Commandments for people, not people for the Commandments. Jesus viewed religious legalism as putting the cart before the horse. More than anything, perhaps, it's not so much a matter of doubting or believing as it is of understanding - of getting the Gospel.

One day when I was in the seventh grade, the subject in our science class was rain gauges. Our teacher, Mr. Kiser, told us that a lot of different types of containers could serve as a rain gauge. Regardless of its shape or size, if the sides were vertical and the bottom was flat and level, anything that could hold water could serve as a rain gauge. A rain gauge could be big or little, round, square, or any other shape.

At least one student in the class didn't get this; namely, me. Patiently, Mr. Kiser tried to explain his point in several different ways, but I just didn't understand. Finally, he said, "Well, we need to move on to other things."

3 J. Schoneberg Setzer, *What's Left to Believe?* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968), p. 32.

I don't remember what the topic was after that because I was still puzzling over rain gauges. Then, all of a sudden, I got it, and blurted out, "Oh, I see. As long as the bottom is flat and the sides are straight up and down, no matter how much water is in it, the water's always going to be at the same level." Mr. Kiser laughed and said, "That's right - congratulations! But we're on another subject now."

Maybe Thomas, like me about rain gauges, was slow to understand. But when he got it, he got it. In fact, the response of Thomas, "My Lord and my God!" could be considered to be the high point or the high water mark of John's Gospel. Thomas needed a personal encounter with the risen Christ like the other disciples had a week earlier.

Maybe Thomas should have been able to take his friends at their word. But for whatever reason, Thomas couldn't. Yet one of the terms for belief Thomas had announced - his need not only to see but also to touch the wounds of Jesus - seems to have become irrelevant once he saw the resurrected Jesus and heard Jesus speak to him.

Our own faith as individuals sometimes may be characterized by troubling doubts and periods of being lukewarm, cold, or seemingly dead. But it's not up to us to create faith for ourselves. As Luther points out in the *Small Catechism*, we can't do it anyway, because faith itself is a gift of God.⁴ The message of Easter is that Christ meets us where we are, just as he met Thomas.

Through God's grace, we can see Jesus and hear his words - in spite of and in the midst of our own doubts and troubles - in the common and ordinary events of everyday life. God transforms ordinary events into extraordinary ones. On Easter, an ordinary execution in an obscure province of the Roman Empire was transformed into the forgiveness of sins, new life, and salvation for all people through faith. And today, ordinary bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ for us. The living and resurrected Christ becomes incorporated within our own bodies, within our lives.

In a car commercial for Kia featuring LeBron James, viewers are told to "Doubt no more." When we behold Christ in his glory, I believe all doubts will disappear. As twins of Thomas, you might say, we'll join the heavenly chorus exclaiming with him, "My Lord and my God!"

⁴ See Luther's explanation to the Third Article of the Creed in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 1162.