

DO NOT DISBELIEVE, BUT BELIEVE

John 20:24-29

INTRO

Doubting Thomas. He gets a bad rap. The disciple who arrived too late for the party and then demanded something he could see and touch. “Give me the facts and let me inspect them for myself.” He was the modern scientific man¹ before carbon dating, genetic testing and white lab coats.

But Thomas wasn't just a cold, analytical mind. He was a man with his heart laying in fragments at his feet. When you experience great loss or trauma, it shakes your belief – the trauma of unexpectedly losing a dear Friend you called “Lord.” The trauma of the last twenty months of sudden global upheaval, relational rending, and unseen spiritual war.

With Thomas, we question, **“How can the things I believe be true if so much bad is happening?”**

[Narnia]

In his Gospel, John addresses this question head on. In fact, he uses the word for “believe” 98 times, five of which we read today. Belief is crucial to John's message, and Thomas is his magnum opus, his climactic example of belief. Thomas is a gift to the Church. In his honest wrestling with his own unbelief, we see ourselves. In Jesus' gentle yet firm dealings with Thomas, we see how Jesus deals with us in our doubts. As we witness Thomas's journey of belief, may we encounter the risen Christ as he did.

I. **The Journey of Belief**

Thomas's example affirms that our belief in Jesus is not so much a destination but a journey. Like an acorn that sprouts, our belief grows and deepens its roots over a lifetime.

Over Thomas's three years with Jesus, it was not one emotional high that defined his belief, but a slow growth.

When we see Thomas elsewhere in John, he's often telling-it-how-it-is.

¹ Dale Bruner, *John*, p. 1185.

A few weeks before the crucifixion, Jesus hears that his friend Lazarus is sick, but he waits two days before leaving to see him. When he does, his disciples remind him that the last time they were in Judea, the people wanted him dead. As Jesus sets out, Thomas rallies the disciples: “Let us also go, that we may die with him” (11:16).

Thomas is a realist; he knows that accompanying Jesus to Judea likely means all of their deaths. He tells it how it is.

Just before this, Jesus reveals the reason for his two-day delay: “Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, *so that you may believe*” (11:15). He is working in his disciples, including “tell-it-how-it-is-Thomas,” that they might *believe*.

Has your growth in belief been a journey, perhaps more slow and faltering than you would like? Be encouraged: an acorn does not become a towering oak overnight.

This begs a question: If our belief in Jesus grows and deepens over a lifetime, how does that growth take place?

II. **The Greenhouse of Belief**

(An all-glass structure where sunlight, temperature and humidity are controlled for optimal plant growth)

What is the greenhouse for belief?

A. First, we see where belief does not grow best – in isolation
v. 24 – “Thomas...was not with [the other disciples] when Jesus came.”

Plants don’t thrive under trash bags, and neither do believers thrive in isolation. Think the last 20 months. Is your belief strengthened when you’re isolated with your thoughts and no one knows your struggles and doubts?

- B. Instead, belief thrives best in community – particularly in consistent, corporate worship

The first time Jesus appeared to the disciples when Thomas was missing was the “first day of the week” (Sunday).

v. 26 says “eight days later” the disciples were gathered again, this time with Thomas present. In ancient timekeeping, eight days later would be exactly one week later, the next Sunday.² This second consecutive Sunday, “Jesus came and stood among them” (20:26).

Is it coincidence that Jesus keeps appearing on Sundays when the disciples are gathered?

Is it intentional that Jesus did not appear to Thomas alone but in the gathering of believers?³

However mundane or routine it may feel, **consistent gathered worship is a crucial way we commune with the risen Christ.**

This means that especially for those struggling with doubts, which is all of us to some degree, the regular assembly of God’s covenant family is critical, for it is chiefly where belief grows and deepens over the long-haul.

Even if you feel like a fake. Even if you don’t sing because you can’t get the words out. Even if you’re not sure any of this is real anymore.

You may say, “I’m regularly gathering for worship, but I can’t shake this nagging unbelief.” I need evidence that God is real, that he is good, that he is here even when all seems dark.

Thomas is our man. Always the realist, he won’t settle for anything less than undeniable proof.

III. The Evidence for Belief

Thomas had two forms of evidence:

² Bruner, p. 1186.

³ Bruner, p. 1186.

1. Eyewitness Testimony – v. 25a “the other disciples told him (kept telling), ‘We have seen the Lord.’ But [Thomas] said to them, ‘Unless I see, I’ll never believe.’”

Thomas discounted the testimonies of his fellow disciples. Do we? When a sister or brother shares how God has been at work in their life, do we let it nourish our souls and strengthen our belief, or do we discount it because it didn’t happen to us?

This is not the only evidence we have:

2. Physical Wounds – Here we see Jesus’ gracious dealing with those who battle doubts and unbelief.

Thomas wasn’t content to hear others share what God had done for them. He longed to see and experience it for himself.⁴

And he had high standards: “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.”

Why demand this? Perhaps self-protection. It would be too good to be true if Jesus had risen from death – perhaps he doesn’t want to hope because he doesn’t want to get hurt again. His demands act like barriers between God and his heart.

What was Jesus’ response to his demands? “how dare you demand something from me.”

No; he said, “ok.” Don’t let the gravity of that escape you. He humbly subjected himself to Thomas’s demands. And notice that his words nearly mirror Thomas’s. He came specifically for him. What kindness!

But that is not all we need in our unbelief. We need one who is at the same time gentle *and firm*.

IV. The Command to Believe

⁴ William Hendriksen, *John*, p. 464.

Jesus is as much Lion as he is Lamb. He is full of truth as well as grace. And here we see the lion-hearted Truth himself fighting for the heart of his beloved disciple:

“Do not disbelieve, but believe.”

Seems silly to say to someone struggling to believe: “don’t not believe; instead believe!” But that is what Jesus says.

Notice that for each demand of Thomas there is a command of Christ.⁵

Thomas said: “I won’t believe unless I put my finger in the nail marks”

Jesus says: “Put your finger here”

Thomas said: “I won’t believe unless I place my hand in his side.”

Jesus says: “Put out your hand, and place it in my side.”

Thomas said: “Unless these things happen I will never believe”

Jesus says: “Don’t disbelieve, but believe”

Do you see what’s happening here?

Jesus makes believing a matter of obedience.

Which makes unbelief disobedience.

Thomas had seen the face of unbelief when Judas kissed Jesus and said, “Greetings Rabbi” (Matthew 26:49). He knew where that path led.

We should see this command as a kind of warning: “Thomas, I have graciously given the evidence you asked for – now believe.”

Unbelief is something to turn from because it leads to death.

Belief is something to embrace because it leads to life.

[In all honesty, the primary reason I chose this passage is because I need it myself. Walking through doubts and unbelief of my own over the past few months, I’ve been reminded that I need not sit back and play the victim – “woe is me, I’m having these doubts” – but I have an active role to play: sharing my situation with other believers, consistently showing up in weekly worship, spending time in the word and prayer privately.

⁵ Hendriksen, p. 465.

This is no easy path, but I'm learning that the fruit of obedience in belief is not only something Jesus commands; it is something he supplies from his own fullness.

As our obedience in belief grows, so grows the fruit:

V. The Fruit of Belief

When belief in the risen Christ blossoms and grows in the heart, what happens?

A. Worshipful Intimacy

Thomas is a story of dramatic reversal – from demanding Christ's death-marks to declaring his deity.

The very statement, "My Lord and my God" is a shockingly bold thing to say, especially for a Jew.⁶

"Lord" is the Greek translation for the OT title for the covenant God of Israel: "Yahweh."

"God" is the translation for God's common OT title "Elohim." You may recognize this verse: "In the beginning, *Elohim* created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1).

John is circling back to the opening line of his Gospel:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1-5).

In this moment of deepening belief, Thomas utters the clearest statement by any disciple of Christ's deity.

His heart is so full, all he can say is: "*My Lord and my God.*"

My Lord. My God. That's what I mean by "worshipful *intimacy.*"

Thomas has personally experienced Jesus in an intimate way that left an eternal mark.

What if the dark night of your soul is the very path to a deeper awe of Jesus than you ever imagined? What if God is working wonders in the dark? And these wonders aren't just for us:

⁶ Hendriksen, p. 465.

B. Mission

Soon after this scene, Jesus sends these 11 apostles out as witnesses of his resurrection.

Tradition holds that Thomas brought Christianity to the shores of India in A.D. 52 – Kerala, southern tip – today, the Marthoma (Saint Thomas) Church; some of the fruit of Thomas’s belief is here this morning: Cecil and Sara Mathews grew up there!

As our belief in Jesus deepens, our boldness for mission expands.

This is not even the best fruit:

C. Life itself

In vv. 30-31, John summarizes his entire book:

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book, but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

“By believing you may have life” because the One we believe in is himself the light the darkness did not overcome, the Living Water, the Bread of Life, the Resurrection and the Life, the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

It’s curious, why was Thomas fixated on Jesus’ wounds? Why not see Jesus’ face or hear his voice?

The wounds Thomas felt in Jesus’ hands and side were not just evidence of his resurrection; they are the source of healing for our unbelief.

Jesus’ wounds speak louder than words: “No doubt of yours can keep me from you. I will change your unbelief to ever-growing belief.

[SHOW ARMS] What more proof do you need? **I love you to death.**
Do not disbelieve, but believe.”