

Absent Thomas

Hespeler, April 12, 2026 © Scott McAndless – Second Sunday of Easter
Acts 2:14a, 22-32, Psalm 16, 1 Peter 1:3-9, John 20:19-31

Poor Thomas. He always gets a bad rap, doesn't he? What do people remember about Thomas? Do they remember that he was brave? When Jesus said he was going to go to Judea because Lazarus had died, and things were looking dangerous, Thomas said to the other disciples, **"Let us also go, that we may die with him."** But do we call him Thomas the Brave? No, we do not.

What Do We Call Thomas?

Or at the Last Supper, when Jesus said, **"And you know the way to the place where I am going,"** everybody else just stared at their feet. They had no clue what he was talking about, but none of them wanted to say. And so, guess who spoke up and said what everyone was thinking? **"Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?'"**

And if Thomas hadn't said that, would we have ever gotten one of Jesus' best quotes: **"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."**

But do we call Thomas the "that's a good question guy"? Do we call him the guy who says what everyone else is thinking? No, we do not.

You all know what we call him, don't you? He is forever and always "Doubting Thomas." And how fair is that? After all, it was really only just that one time.

Not Even Condemned for It

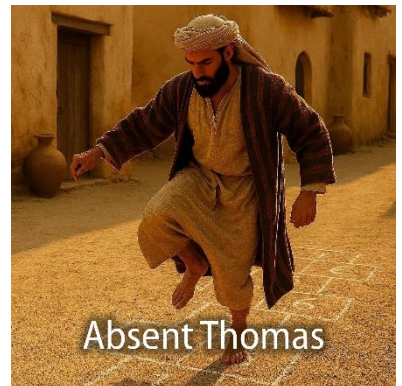
And it is not even as if the Bible condemns him for doubting that one time, nor does Jesus. Yes, Jesus does tell Thomas to stop doubting. But he only says this after he has shown Thomas his hands and his side, which was the condition that Thomas had set in order that he might believe.

We have turned Thomas into a story about the danger of doubt. And, as a result, we have piled guilt and shame onto the heads of anyone who has ever asked a question or expressed a doubt. We told all those people who had legitimate doubts that they should suppress them. We made them hide everything that they were thinking. This has made some people afraid of their own thought processes. And how many, when they couldn't do that, just abandoned the faith as a result, feeling as if there were no place for them in the church and that they would never belong?

But Thomas is not Doubting Thomas. He is Thomas the Brave. And he is especially the guy who is not afraid to say what everyone is thinking. And we need more of his kind in the church today.

One Thing Wrong

That is not to say, however, that Thomas didn't get anything wrong. And, because he did, he had to live with his doubts for much longer than was necessary.



Yes, I do have one question for Thomas today. I want to ask him, “Why weren’t you there?” That is the one thing in this whole story that is never addressed. Think about everything that had happened leading up to the beginning of our reading this morning.

At Their Worst

This group of disciples had just been through the worst events of their life. Their friend, and the wisest and best person among them, had been arrested. He had been rushed through a mockery of a trial and crucified.

Not only had they been devastated on a personal level, but they had also had all of the hopes that they had built up around this man dashed at once. He had announced a new kind of kingdom, one in which even people like them could have a place. Oh, they had had extremely grand visions of what that might look like.

But it had all come crashing down around them. And they had fled in confusion and fear. But today, on the third day after all this had happened, the first day of the week, the old gang was getting together. They were gathering, perhaps, to commiserate and to remember the good times. But they were also gathering to work through some disturbing and confusing things that had happened over the past few hours.

Confusing Situation

First, Mary had flown in with a wild accusation that the tomb where Jesus had been laid was open and some mysterious people had stolen his body. Peter and one of the others had gone to investigate, but had come back with nothing clear to report, only more questions. Why would grave robbers bother folding up the grave clothes, or even want to leave them behind in the first place?

And then Mary, looking even more crazed than the first time, had run in to declare, **“I have seen the Lord.”** It seemed as if the people in the group were slowly going crazy, and so they all gathered to try and work all of this stuff out. Except they weren’t *all* together, were they? One of them hadn’t shown up for the old boys’ reunion. Where was Absent Thomas?

Where Was Thomas?

He probably would have said that he was too busy. He had no time because he had to get his beard trimmed. Or maybe he had a big bet on his favourite team in the chariot races, and he just had to be there to cheer them on. Or, for all I know, he was playing hopscotch or throwing stones in a lake.

The first lesson of time management is that it is not about how much time you have. Everyone has the same amount of time. It is about what your priorities are. If something is important to you, you will make time for it. And if you consistently can’t make time for something that you claim is important to you, it is probably not the priority that you think it is.

They Needed Thomas

So, if Thomas was not there with the others on the first day of the week, it was because it was not at the top of his priority list. And that was a big loss for the other disciples, because they were in a fragile state. They could have used Thomas the Brave and Thomas who can say what everyone

is thinking. The power of the group was lessened because Thomas didn't feel it was important to provide his unique strengths.

They gathered without his calm and rationalistic presence. And yet, despite that lack, they experienced something fantastic. They experienced for themselves the power and the reality of the resurrection of Jesus. It turned out that it was really Thomas who was missing out because he decided that he had other priorities.

Radical Practice

The fact that the appearances of the risen Jesus in the twentieth chapter of the Gospel of John occur one week apart on the first day of the week is not just a matter of coincidence. We know that the earliest Christians very quickly settled on one practice. They met on Sundays.

This was a radical innovation for one reason above all others. Virtually all of the earliest followers of Jesus were Jews who had been taught from the cradle that the proper day for religious practice was the Sabbath day, the seventh day of the week, the day we call Saturday.

And calendars matter to people. They will fight you if you try and change their calendar on them. People do not change their longstanding cultural traditions lightly. Something must have happened that made a big impression to persuade them to do that. And we are told that that really impressive thing was none other than the resurrection of Jesus on the first day of the week.

But it was not just a one-time reality for them. Jesus didn't just rise that one time. They also discovered that, when they gathered together on all subsequent Sundays, even if there were only two or three of them, the risen Jesus would be right there with them in their midst

Table Fellowship with Jesus

Jesus, during his life, had had the habit, as a sign of the kingdom of God, of inviting all sorts of people to his table. It didn't matter who they were. They might be prostitutes or tax collectors. They might be rich or poor, outcasts or strangers. All of them would find a place at Jesus' table.

And so, whenever the earliest Christians wanted to recapture what it had been like when Jesus was around, they would share the same kinds of meals, welcoming all comers.

They experienced more than commiseration, good food and fellowship when they did that. They experienced the presence of their risen Lord. That was how they knew he was risen. Not merely because of the testimony passed down from the apostles. They also experienced it for themselves when they gathered as something that eventually came to be called the church.

And that is what these two appearances, one week apart on the first day of the week, are referring to. This is John's way of reminding his readers of their own practice of gathering as the church, even though, of course, this practice had not yet been established within the setting of this story.

Thomas Misses the Experience

And with this in mind, Thomas becomes a very important lesson for the church. The church, represented symbolically by the disciples gathering on a Sunday to eat together, collectively experiences the reality of the resurrection of Christ. But, since Thomas is absent, he does not participate in that experience. As a result, he is left in doubt and disbelief.

But when, the following Sunday, the “church” gathers again, this time Thomas is present. This time he too is able to experience the power and truth of the resurrection. He experiences it so powerfully that he cries out, **“My Lord and my God!”**

Jesus Shows Up

What is the message in that for the church today? Am I suggesting that the risen Jesus is going to show up here one Sunday morning and, if you don’t make it here every week, you might miss it and you’ll regret it?

Well, I wouldn’t put it exactly like that. But there is some truth there. Jesus does show up in the life of the church. He has promised that he would.

I know that he’s not going to show up and go around the room, inviting us to put our fingers in the holes in his hands or our hands in his side. But Jesus does show up here. I know that many have experienced his presence in quiet ways and in powerful ways.

They have experienced a spiritual presence. They have seen Jesus in the face of their brother or sister in Christ. They have been introduced to him in the music, the words or the preaching.

Not About Being Present at a Certain Time

I’m not saying this in order to make anyone feel guilty because they cannot or they choose not to show up to church every Sunday. Don’t get me wrong, I would certainly love it if all of you did that all the time, but I also recognize that modern life is really complicated and that we are all pulled in many different directions for some very good reasons.

And anyway, it is not as if I am saying that Jesus only shows up here between 10 and 11 am on Sunday, because he doesn’t. I have seen Jesus very much present in a kind volunteer helping someone on Food Bank Day. I have seen Jesus show up to provide someone with just the right piece of clothing in unexpected and near miraculous ways through Hope Clothing.

No, there are no rules that you have to be a part of the church in specific ways or at specific times. I’m not going to pile one more feeling of obligation onto the heads of any of you. You already have enough of that in your life.

Experiencing the Risen Jesus

But the message of Absent Thomas is that the experience of the Risen Jesus is something that any of you can have in your life. But Jesus never promised you that it would come to you all on your lonesome. Jesus rose from the dead for the assembly of God’s people, and it is in those assemblies that Jesus makes himself and his resurrection power fully known to his people.

Those assemblies can take the form of high liturgical church services, or the prayer meeting of a small group. They can be about believers coming together for works of service, to sing, to share a meal or to do a hundred other things. The one common denominator is that Jesus is there when the church gathers.

And there will be moments when the power of that presence will break through to you. Unless, of course, you are just an Absent Thomas.