

## **BELIEVING THOMAS**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

My big sister, Susan, has never once called me “Phil” – always “Philip.” She has never called my brother David “Dave.” She just doesn’t use nicknames.

But I have had quite a few nicknames in my life. For many years, I was known as “Sick Phil” or “Crutch Boy” in my family. In most family vacation photos, I have some sort of bandage or cast on some body part or I’m on a pair of crutches. When I was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, Pam McGlaughlin started calling me “Glad Bag,” just a few years after the sandwich bags were introduced to the market. Fortunately, that one didn’t stick! All through high school and college, my youth group friends called me “Wimp” or “Wimpy” (some of them still do – it’s a long story!). In college, my buddy Ed Ferren (a Roman Catholic from New Jersey) started calling me “Padre.” Most of my college friends became doctors and lawyers – I was the only preministerial student in the group. The longest-lasting nickname (and my favorite) was “PG.” For a while, I was PG2, until Peter Green graduated a couple of years ahead of me. Now, I’m Dr. Phil – and that’s OK with me. I finally broke down and ordered a vanity license plate with Dr. Phil on it – I’m waiting for it to arrive in the mail.

Did you know there are plenty of nicknames in the New Testament?

There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet. He also put in a good word for the recently converted Paul to the disciples in Jerusalem. (Acts 4:36-37; Acts 9:27)

Simon’s brother, Andrew, took Simon to see Jesus, who looked at him and said, “You are Simon, son of John. You are to be called Cephas” (which is translated Peter). And Peter is translated “Rock” – “Rocky!” (John 1:42)

Then there were the brothers James and John, sons of Zebedee, to whom Jesus gave the name Boanerges, that is Sons of Thunder. (Mark 3:17)

Another James, in order not to be confused with James, son of Zebedee, was called James the lesser/James the younger/James the minor – maybe “Little Jim.” (Mark 15:40)

Of course, there are the followers of Jesus, men and women “who belonged to the Way” (Acts 9:2) “It was in Antioch that the disciples were first called ‘Christians,’” (Acts 11:26) which means “followers of Christ.”

However, there is one nickname that we often use that you won’t find in the New Testament – “Doubting Thomas.” In fact, the name “Thomas” itself might be a nickname, since it is a Greek word derived from the Aramaic or Syriac word for “twin.”

He was also called “Didymus,” which is another Greek word for “twin.” Whose twin? We don’t know – some people say he looked a lot like Jesus. Some traditions tried to claim he really was Jesus’ twin brother (there’s some interesting theology for you!). One early writing from the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. called *The Gospel of Thomas* begins: “These are the secret sayings that the living Jesus spoke and Didymus Judas Thomas recorded.” So, the disciple’s name might really have been Judas, and his nickname(s) “Thomas” and “Didymus.” But you won’t find the nickname “Doubting Thomas” anywhere in the gospels.

We call a skeptic who refuses to believe without a direct personal experience a “Doubting Thomas.” Unless you’re from Missouri, the “Show Me State,” you might not like being called a “Doubting Thomas.” On the other hand, how many times have you said, “I’ll believe it when I see it”? Just because Thomas told the other disciples, “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,” Thomas has been forever remembered as “Doubting Thomas.” But is that really fair to Thomas?

For a number of years, I’ve developed more and more sympathy for Thomas Didymus. After all, he didn’t ask to see or do anything more than his fellow disciples had already seen and done. A week earlier, when the risen Jesus appeared to the disciples in Thomas’ absence, it was Jesus himself who “showed them his hands and his side.” (John 20:20) Maybe it’s not so far-fetched to think that when those disciples talked to Thomas later on, they said to him, “We have seen the Lord . . . And he even showed us his hands and his side!”

When Rev. Bobby Tyson from the Wallace United Methodist Church invited me to be “Thomas” in this year’s Living Last Supper on Maundy Thursday, I gladly accepted the invitation. People have asked me, “How was it?” and I have answered, “I have to say it was fun being with all of those men in rehearsals. Also, at our Wednesday night dress rehearsal, as I sat behind ‘Jesus’ and listened to my fellow ‘disciples’ make their speeches, it hit me that those real disciples in the upper room were just a bunch of men like us. They probably kidded each other and talked about each other and wondered about Jesus and what they had gotten themselves into.” After “being” Thomas a month ago, I have even more sympathy for this guy who’s been saddled with the nickname “Doubting Thomas” for 2,000 years.

Without posing with my hand up and minus the makeup beard and hair color (Nancy said she hadn’t seen my hair that dark in many, many years!), let me share with you Thomas’ comments from that Living Last Supper:

“I am Thomas, the twin, or Thomas called Didymus, which means ‘twin.’ While I do not look upon life with gloom and despondency, I usually demand proof before I believe; I want to see before committing myself. Yet I am not a man of doubt. Rather I feel sometimes that I am a man of daring. I recall the day when Mary and Martha sent word to the Lord that their brother, Lazarus, was dead. Jesus turned to us and said, ‘Let us go to him.’ We knew of the growing opposition to Jesus and some of the apostles didn’t want to go to Bethany; they shrank from the unseen danger. Yet I remember how I spoke out and rebuked them all by saying, ‘Let us also go with Him

that we may die with Him.’ Why do people remember my doubts and forget my daring? Remember the questions and overlook the affirmations? Remember my fear and forget my faith?

“I used to go fishing with some of the others and how well I remember the Beatitudes He spoke on the Horns of Hattin during the first year of His public ministry. And I can almost see Him rebuking the winds on stormy Galilee and healing the sick, curing the diseased, opening the eyes of the blind, unstopping the ears of the deaf, cleansing the lepers and preaching the gospel to the poor.

“Yet opposition has developed and grown to white heat. His enemies are determined to destroy Him. Why? Because the God He reveals is a greater God than the petty little man-made deities they have enshrined upon the altars of their hearts and temples. He would bring us all up to God while His enemies would cut God down to their own size. He would make us God’s servants, while they would make God their servant. And now, He says that even among us, the chosen twelve, there is a traitor. Is He speaking of me? Is He referring to me? Is it I? Is it I?”

What if we take **this** description of Thomas (even though it’s just a play script that someone wrote) as more accurate than our typical “Doubting Thomas” nickname? What if we remembered Thomas’ daring rather than his doubts? His affirmations rather than his questions? His faith rather than his fear?

My friend and colleague, Rev. Chris Denny, moved from the Elizabethtown Presbyterian Church to be pastor of a church in South Carolina. For a while I quit receiving his “Almost Daily Prayer” emails, but then they started showing up again. Here is his blog/prayer from Monday, April 24 (which was eight days after Easter, just as the story in John says). Chris calls it “Courageous Doubts.”

*Lord, why have people given Thomas such a hard time? I mean: who among us has not wondered about the truth of the resurrection?*

*Easter is so shocking to our senses, to our normal way of thinking, to our everyday lived experience.*

*Indeed the Christian philosopher Sore Kierkegaard has said that the idea that the eternal, infinite, transcendent God could simultaneously be incarnated as a finite human being, in time, to die on the cross is an offense to reason.*

*Doubts are part of faith! St. Anselm’s motto is “faith seeking understanding.” Or as the father declared to you: “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.”*

*I think Thomas was among the first of your disciples to wrestle with faith. I think he was being courageous, asking the BIG questions, and not settling for little answers. Instead he is demanding, like Job, “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you.”*

*Give me courageous doubts; such ones that open me to the possibility of being surprised by your Risen Presence in my ordinary life! Amen.<sup>1</sup>*

What if we started thinking of Thomas as “Believing Thomas”? After all, Thomas makes **the** grandest and greatest confession of faith in the gospels: “My Lord and my God!” Thomas didn’t want facts and figures and definitions and dogma and data and proof beyond a reasonable doubt. Thomas wanted to **know** – he wanted to **know** that

the figure the other disciples had seen was really the same person Jesus he had committed to following, even to the point of saying, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” (John 11:16)

More than that, Thomas wanted to be **known** – **known** by his Lord and his God, **known** by the One he had seen nailed to the cross ten days earlier, **known** by Jesus who would accept his heartfelt and daring confession of devotion and love and loyalty, “My Lord and my God!”

Who was Thomas Didymus’ twin? Do you remember how, in Luke’s story about Easter afternoon, Cleopas’ companion on the road to Emmaus is never named? Some people say Luke is inviting us to **be** that unnamed companion who recognizes the risen Lord Jesus in the breaking of the bread.

In the same way, some people suggest that each of us is Thomas’ twin – like Thomas with our doubts and our desire to know and be known by Jesus risen from the dead. I like that idea, because deep down inside, each of us wants more than creeds and dogma and facts and figures and proof. What we really want is a relationship with the living Jesus, so we can say, “My Lord and my God!”

In the last year or so, I have come across another blogger named Andy King, who writes poems about Bible stories. See if his poem called “Thomas the Twin” doesn’t describe the longing in your heart as a disciple of Jesus who sometimes wonders.

*John 11:16 – Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”*

- 1. But you fled, as the others did, when he was arrested. From a distance you watched him suffer and die on the cross. That night you lay down on a bed of hot coals, and the fire of your words burned your eyes.*
- 2. All day the memories came like old boats beached in darkness. You couldn’t seem to recall the shapes of simple flowers yet could not forget the faces turned toward him on the Galilean hills. The wet clouds in your eyes hid the sun.*
- 3. You were not with the others when the women told their news. You found it hard to breathe behind the shut doors of the house; your legs needed movement, your eyes wanted sky, as if trying to prove your soul was not entombed.*
- 4. Grief circled you like a city, you circled in your despair, you circled back to the house, a moth in shadow, seeking light. Faces smiled, filling your eyes like bright candles, holding out to you astonishing news, a hot flame. You wondered: is this what the moth sees before it dies?*
- 5. How you longed for the news to be true, longed as the stilled ship longs for new wind in its sails, as eyes deep in a cave long for light. Longed to be able to touch him again. For him to be able to touch you.*
- 6. Now he is here, and let your heart lift from hurting. Now he is here, let your lungs fill with breath. Now he is here: your mind kneels in wonder. Touch*

*him in the midst of your fellow disciples, see him, your crucified and living Lord, listen as he speaks to you the blessing of peace.*

*7. Let your eyes be filled, Thomas, with horizons of light. You died with him. Now rise with him too.<sup>2</sup>*

***Let us pray: Almighty and everliving God, who strengthened your apostle Thomas with sure and certain faith in your Son's resurrection: Grant us so perfectly and without doubt to believe in Jesus Christ, our Lord and our God, that our faith may never be found wanting in your sight; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Rev. Chris Denny, "Praying today: Courageous Doubts," April 24, 2017, at "Almost Daily Prayer – Passion for God" at [www.almostdailyprayer.com](http://www.almostdailyprayer.com).

<sup>2</sup>Andrew King's Lectionary Weblog, April 20, 2014, "Poem For the Sunday Lectionary (Easter 2) – Thomas the Twin," at [www.earth2earth.wordpress.com](http://www.earth2earth.wordpress.com).