

The show-me disciple (John 20:19-31)

Mary can't experience the resurrected Jesus for the disciples, and the disciples can't experience Jesus for Thomas.

by [Amy B. Hunter](#) in the [March 13, 2002](#) issue

So where was Thomas anyway that first Easter evening? In my childhood Sunday school classes, Thomas was a “bad guy.” When the other ten disciples told him that Jesus was alive after his crucifixion, Thomas refused to believe it. He separated himself from the others and demanded to see Christ for himself. In short, we learned that he was a dull, doubting follower of Christ whom we should not imitate. The moral of the story was clear—Don’t be like Thomas! Believe! Don’t doubt!

But I confess to a sneaking attraction to the rogues of scripture—Jacob the con artist, Jeremiah the complaining prophet, Peter the impulsive disciple. Perhaps because I’ve often found myself in Christian communities where no one voices doubt or struggle, I am reluctant to dismiss Thomas. At my evangelical college, we didn’t talk about our fears or failures because we thought others would judge us as unspiritual. And in churches that display only facades of niceness, I’ve discovered all sorts of anxieties and resentments festering underneath. I’ve watched people struggling alone with deep questions because they were afraid of how others might react to their doubts. Doubts and uncertainty frighten us. That’s why we reject Thomas—he dares to bring doubt into our lives of faith.

When I take a close look, I realize that Thomas is a practical, concrete sort of guy. Earlier in John’s Gospel, Thomas insists that the disciples accompany Jesus when he goes to Bethany, a place he’d had to leave under threat of being stoned. Thomas supports Jesus’ apparently suicidal plan with, “Let us also go that we may die with him.” Even better, in the midst of Jesus’ long farewell discourse, Thomas speaks up, cutting through Jesus’ mystical, poetic and downright baffling language. Jesus assures his followers, “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. . . . where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am

going,” to which Thomas replies, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Thomas is plainspoken and gutsy. He wants to understand what’s going on, and be able to face the situation at hand.

So where is Thomas that first Easter evening when the other disciples are hiding in the upper room? Is he faithless, separating himself from the community? Remember, Mary Magdalene has told the group that she has seen Jesus. Maybe Thomas can’t imagine hiding when someone has just reported seeing Jesus alive. Perhaps he is trying to find out the truth. Or maybe he is the only disciple with enough sense to recognize that this hiding thing could take a long time, and that he’d better go out and get milk and bread for the group.

When the disciples tell Thomas they have seen Jesus, he answers, “Unless I see the mark of the nails—in fact, until I touch those marks and put my hand in the wound in his side, I’m not going to believe,” responding out of his practical, concrete nature. What if this is some mistake, a delusion born of desperate hope, an apparition? Mary’s experience of meeting Jesus in the garden cannot keep the disciples from hiding themselves in a room. Thomas is no more of a doubter than the other disciples, than most of us. But he has to find out.

In his Easter evening appearance, Jesus shows his hands and sides to the gathered disciples. Thomas is asking for the same assurance that the others have had. But he goes a step beyond, demanding to touch Jesus’ wounds. He insists upon verifying that this is the crucified Jesus and not an illusion or a ghost.

Thomas wants proof. And he wants Jesus. When Jesus again appears to his disciples in the closed room, Thomas is there. And far from rebuking Thomas, Jesus offers to meet his conditions. “Put your fingers in my hands, touch my side.” The Gospel story gives no report of Thomas following through with these gruesome actions, and I don’t believe he felt any need to do so. But the personal encounter makes Jesus’ resurrection real to this follower.

In fact, Thomas’s answer, “My Lord and my God!” is the high point of John’s Gospel. When Thomas gets it, he *gets* it. No one else has offered such devotion or named Jesus as God. Thomas holds out for an experience of Jesus on his own terms until he finds his terms made foolish by the reality of seeing Jesus. Only then does he make his statement of faith.

Thomas has to make this personal connection with Jesus for himself. Mary can't experience the resurrected Jesus for the disciples, and the disciples can't experience Jesus for Thomas. It is faith, not doubt, that holds out for one's own experience of Jesus.

Five years ago I had emergency surgery. My sister, a professor with final exams to give, was getting married in less than a week. Yet she drove from New York City to Massachusetts in a snowstorm to see me in the hospital. No phone call would reassure her that I was alive. She had to see me with her own eyes.

Sometimes the demand to see is not doubt. Sometimes it is even love.