

Faithful Thomas (John 20:19-31)

Christianity in India goes back to the ancient world.

by [Sean Gladding](#)

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The cabin lights had been dimmed, blankets pulled over legs or shoulders, and as usual, I was trying to will myself to fall asleep as the Boeing 737 conveyed us across the Atlantic. My wife and I were heading to England to visit my family and to introduce our six-month-old son to them. We'd been able to secure a coveted bulkhead seat with a bassinet, but there was no seat available for me there, so I found myself a couple of rows back. This was in the days before omnipresent screens on the back of seats: days when we read books, or chatted with strangers, or listened to a favorite band's latest cassette on a Walkman.

But on that particular flight I did something different: I listened to my neighbor, book in hand, wife's head on shoulder, gently chanting in a sing-song way in a language I did not recognize. I was hardly a well-seasoned international traveler, but still, that struck me as unusual. When he finished, he closed the book, eased his now sleeping wife into a comfortable position, and then sat, staring ahead.

My curiosity finally got the better of me, and I asked him if he wouldn't mind telling me what he had been singing. He turned his body toward me and laid a hand on the book in his lap. "It is the custom of my people to read the four gospels in the Bible aloud during the season of Lent. It has become the practice of my wife and I to sing the words to each other at the end of the day, and this was the first opportunity we've had since we began our journey earlier. I hope I did not disturb you."

“Not at all,” I assured him. “What a meaningful practice.”

“You are a Christian?” he asked.

And then—in the way we used to do while spending multiple hours in close proximity as planes winged us to our destinations—we quietly spoke. Beginning as usual with where we were going and why, where we were coming from (me, Texas, but England originally; he, Kerala in India), we moved on to speak of our shared faith, our families, our communities. At some point I realized we hadn’t introduced ourselves.

“My name’s Sean, by the way.”

“And I’m Thomas. It’s good to meet you, brother.”

And then I said something that still causes me to wince whenever I recall this particular conversation.

“And how long have your people been Christians?”

Much to his credit, he didn’t respond in any of the ways he could have done, many of which I have imagined in the years since. After all, the crass assumption that lay beneath my question was that people from my homeland must have gone as missionaries to his homeland. There were all manner of sarcastic or offended responses my traveling companion could have made. I’m sure my world religion and cross-cultural mission professors from seminary would have shaken their heads in disappointment.

His response was simply to smile and say, “My name is Thomas.”

I looked at him blankly, not understanding, thinking he had perhaps misheard me.

“My name is Thomas,” he repeated. “My people have been Christians for about 2,000 years.”

He didn’t continue in the way I would have been tempted to, by saying, “And how long have your people been Christians?” Instead, he gently explained that St. Thomas is believed to have brought the Christian faith to India, and he is descended from a long line of faithful Christians. Me? I’m the first person on either side of my family for unknown generations to become a follower of Jesus.

Whenever we get to the story of “Doubting Thomas” in the lectionary, I remember my encounter with another Thomas, from Kerala.