



Roanoke, Virginia

April 11, 2021

## *“The Twin Renamed”*

*John 20:19-31*

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<sup>19</sup> When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” <sup>20</sup> After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” <sup>22</sup> When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

<sup>24</sup> But Thomas (who was called the Twin<sup>[a]</sup>), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup> So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “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.”

<sup>26</sup> A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” <sup>27</sup> Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” <sup>28</sup> Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” <sup>29</sup> Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

<sup>30</sup> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. <sup>31</sup> But these are written so that you may come to believe<sup>[b]</sup> that Jesus is the Messiah,<sup>[c]</sup> the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.



I feel for Thomas. Every Second Sunday of Easter, the lectionary brings us to this passage from John's gospel. We read of the disciples painted as faithful and the unwillingness to believe and the skepticism of Thomas. As history has told and retold this story, Thomas has been named "Doubting Thomas"—and I do not think it is fair. So, I wrote Thomas a letter.

Dear Thomas,

Nicknames are too often cruel, and yours is no exception. I write to apologize for my part in the ongoing moniker given to you as doubting. And I apologize on behalf of the church. You, Didymus, the one they call "the twin," were a faithful disciple, one of the original twelve. Just like the other disciples, you walked alongside Jesus; just like the other disciples, you witnessed miracles; just like the other disciples, you listened to his preaching and participated in his ministry to bind the wounds of the brokenhearted; just like the other disciples, you were sent by Christ to spread the good news and begin his church. I do apologize. Other disciples got cool nicknames like "The Rock" or "the disciple whom Jesus loves"—you were stuck with "Doubting."

I have been given nicknames that were not so cool either. I have been called all sorts of things. And, unfortunately, I have also given nicknames to others that were not so cool. I understand, as with your unmerited nickname, that some nicknames stick whether we like it or not. And you are "doubting", and everyone knows you by that name. The difficult thing is, the more you hear the nicknames given to you, the more you come to believe them to be true. So, I am sympathetic to the situation that led to your unfortunate nickname.

\*Let me stop right here. Before I continue reading the letter, let's examine more the character of Thomas. John's gospel gives more time to other disciples than the other gospel writers do. There are the prominent characters that we come to know but others make their way to the foreground in the fourth gospel. In John's Gospel, Philip and Nathanael are more important than James and John, who are not named at all. Philip calls Nathanael; he answers Jesus' question about how they are to feed the multitude, and he wants to see Jesus' Father. And Philip interceded for the Greeks who wish to see Jesus. Another character, Andrew, follows John before he follows Jesus, but he preceded his brother—the more famous Simon Peter—whom Andrew invites to come to see the Messiah he has found. Andrew also is the disciple who located the young boy who had the fish and bread to feed the multitude. Then we have Thomas. Thomas is mentioned a few places in this gospel. We first meet Thomas when news of Lazarus's death reaches Jesus. When Jesus decides to head back to Bethany, where he was almost stoned and face potential harm to raise Lazarus, Thomas is the one who says to the other disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Later, Thomas again speaks up when Jesus tells the disciples there are many dwelling places in his Father's house, that he is going to prepare a place for them, and that they know the way. Thomas interrupts, "Lord, we do not know where you are going; so how can we know the way?"



This sheds some light on the emotional characterization of Thomas. And in our passage for today, Thomas pushes for proof and is given the nickname “doubting”—but how else was he supposed to react?

Thomas is called “The Twin.” His name is the Greek—Didymus—which means “twin.” There is a gospel that bears his name, too: The Gospel of Thomas. It opens with, “These are the hidden words that the living Jesus spoke. And Didymus Judas Thomas wrote them down,” or in the original language, “Judas, who is also called Thomas.” So, Thomas’s name is Judas. Is this a family name, and “twin” is to differentiate him from his twin brother Judas Iscariot? If so, is he a personification of coming to belief, as opposed to his twin brother who sides with betrayal. Or is he the twin of Jesus? The one who is biologically closest to Jesus still needs proof to see who Jesus is. Scholarship is mixed on this, and quite frankly, there is no clearly defined understanding of Thomas’s family of origin. Perhaps, we will never truly know...

Back to the letter...

You are now “doubting”, and everyone knows you by that name. So, I am sympathetic to the situation that led to your unfortunate nickname. Just in case you have forgotten how you got the nickname, let me remind you. The man you followed—literally followed—for the last 3 years was just killed...brutally killed. You are no fool, Thomas. You know how death works. Once Jesus was dead you thought, game over. You witnessed Jesus raise someone else from the dead but how could Jesus raise himself. He was dead. Then, a few days later, you go out for a few hours and when you return your friends tell you they have seen the Lord, that Jesus has come to them. Wait, what?! They say he is alive. You say... “Prove it!” You say, “Unless I see the marks on his hands and the wound in his side, I cannot believe you.”

The disciples were no less ‘doubting’ than you were. When Mary Magdalene told them the news, did they fully believe? If they did, then why were they behind locked doors in fear? And even more, they have just seen the Lord and still stayed behind locked doors a week later when you were with them. It so unfair that some things get overlooked but then they become the focus when it happens to you.

Thomas, I respect your rationality. I understand your need for evidence. You were in grief. You were mourning the loss of your leader and dear friend. Was that why you were not with the others? Was that why you were by yourself? I sometimes need to be alone when I am hurting, too, or when I am trying to process my pain and my grief. I am sorry that now, on top of your hurting, now you must try and process what the others just said to you. That must have been hard. To hold the two emotional extremes all at once in this moment—sorrow and the potential for joy. Your heart must have been heavy. I am sorry you had to go through that.

A week went by and you were with the other disciples—again I remind you behind locked doors. The anticipation must have been hard for you as well, waiting for Jesus to appear. Then, Jesus



appears and walks up to you. Knowing your heart, the pain, the grief, the uncertainty, he calls your name. Jesus asks you to face the darkness of your grief, to face the doubt that crept into your mind, to face the literal wounds that have caused you pain. “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop your unbelief and believe.”

Your response, Thomas, is why I think your nickname is so unfair, and why I am writing this apology. If you had refused Jesus’ invitation, then your nickname would be fitting. If you said, “Jesus, no thanks. Dead people stay dead. That’s how the universe works; you live, you die, and you’re dead. I am not willing to have that understanding challenged.” If you said that, then ‘doubting’ would fit. But that is not what you said. When Jesus offered his hands and his side as evidence of his living again, as proof that he was the risen Christ, you believed. Then you cried out, “My Lord and my God!” That is powerful faith, Thomas! And you didn’t even touch the marks on his hands or stick your finger into his side—you believed!

And I thank you for reminding me of the ‘doubting’ within me. Life has been hard. Life seems to be unfair for so many. There are so many questions that I want to ask but am afraid to. I even struggle facing the light amid the darkness of my own sorrow and pain and grief. I have cried out many times asking God for a sign, something tangible to believe in. Too many times I have locked myself away behind closed doors, shut out in fear. I, too, have heard great news yet still do not believe. Unfortunately, it has been at times my own inner voice who calls me cruel nicknames and tells me that I am not enough. You have been called ‘doubting’ by others, but I have called myself worse names than doubting. I have called myself ‘unworthy’; too many times I tell myself I am not good enough; too often I run and hide in fear of my own strength or my own abilities—what if I fail? Then I would have to call myself a failure. I, too, am labeled ‘skeptic’, but I am a skeptic of my own worth. Even more, Thomas, sometimes I am not honest with myself. I sometimes hide my true feelings and mask them with images of control and fake smiles. I am scared at times to voice my misunderstandings or pretend that I know what is going on when I really don’t. I do this in order to fit in or be popular, and sometimes I pretend so that I can be seen as smart or as normal. I pretend that I have it all together; I say “it’s ok, I’m fine”—when really I am hurting and scared and uncertain. And sometimes, Thomas, I don’t even know how I feel. It seems strange, I know, but sometimes I feel... well... nothing. But I am afraid to talk to someone about it. So, once again I pretend or hide away. It is a lot to deal with alone.

Thomas, I write to also say thank you for your honest approach to faith. Thank you for not saying you understood what you really didn’t understand or that you believed what you did not believe. That is uncompromising honesty. You are courageous in acknowledging the difficulties of this life, the strangeness of faith that Christ calls us to, the upside-down nature of discipleship. If anyone says it is easy, they are kidding themselves. So, I thank you for your honesty because it is helping me to be more honest.

Thomas, my experience with fear and doubt is often scary, but always humbling. Was that your experience, too? Was it humbling and empowering all at the same time? You are not “Doubting Thomas.” Perhaps you should be called “Humble Thomas,” for what apostle knew the weakness of



human intellect better than you. You are “Courageous Thomas” willing to die with Christ, or “Brave Thomas” because faith in the face of doubt is hard. You are “Honest Thomas” because you voice what you were thinking and did not shy away from hard questions. You are “Obedient Thomas” because when Christ commanded you to believe, you did.

So, Thomas, I pray that we, like the Father of the demon-possessed son, cry out and say through our tears, “Lord I believe, help my unbelief.” And when Jesus meets us where we are, as we vulnerably and courageously acknowledge the wounds that forever change our lives, extends peace and compassion, our unbelief then will be renamed as we exclaim, “My Lord and my God!”

I hope that I can emulate your character. That I may stand and face my own insecurities that I have locked away in the darkness of an internal room. I hope that I can courageously, as you have, face the wounds of life that have caused me pain, the marks that have pierced my esteem and my love of self. Because you have taught me, that when I am brave enough to go into the darkness of my own pain and my own doubt...Jesus is there to meet me. Jesus is there to meet me as I am. As I stand behind the locked doors of fear, Jesus comes to me there. As I stand behind the locked doors of my insecurities, Jesus comes to me there. As I stand behind the locked doors of doubt that I will ever be worthy of love, Jesus comes to me there. He shows me his wounds, and he shows me his grace. You have taught me, Thomas, that Christ meets me wherever I am, even in the darkness of fear and doubt.

Thank you for showing me this, so I can see and believe—so I can believe even without seeing.

Thomas, thank you!

Sincerely,

The Twin Renamed

