

## NEW SERIES: EASTER MIRACLES IN PROCESS

### PART 2: THOMAS - EASTER MIRACLE IN PROCESS - John 11:5-10, 16; 20: 19-22, 25-28

In his book *What If It's True? A Storyteller's Journey with Jesus*, Charles Martin places certain people at the crucifixion of Jesus. His approach, along with my contributions goes something like this:

A woman is in the crowd. No one knows her name. All anyone knows is that for 12 years she bled constantly, making her an outcast. People saw her as unclean and defiled so she was not allowed to enter the temple. Then one day she met the condemned man. She clung to the "wings" of his shirt. Now she doesn't bleed anymore.

There was another woman at the cross that day, as well. She had been caught in the act of adultery and while still half-dressed she was dragged by the Pharisees to where Jesus was teaching. They were looking for ways to trap him into breaking the Law of Moses and were willing to sacrifice this woman to that end. The penalty for adultery was death by stoning. "*What should be her penalty,*" they ask Jesus? She remembers Jesus kneeling and while at her level drawing with his finger in the sand. She remembers the words he drew. He was quiet for what seemed an eternity and then He spoke to the Pharisees: "*If any of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone.*" She looked from Jesus to the religious leaders, wondering if they would throw the rocks at her. They looked away and in order from oldest to youngest they turned and walked away. Jesus saved her life and forgave her sin that day, and now she cries for him.

Bartimaeus had walked some 20 miles through the night. The two met a few years back at the city gate. Bartimaeus had been begging because he was blind. Then he met the Man, told him, "*I want to see.*" Ever since, Bartimaeus has had perfect vision – but now he doesn't like what he sees.

Imagine who may have also witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus on that ugly Friday. Was the demon-possessed man there? Did the paralyzed man walk miles to be near Jesus at his time of need? How about the one lone leper who came back to thank Jesus for saving him from the death and exclusion of leprosy, finding salvation in the process. Did he use his new-found-freedom to travel to Jerusalem from Samaria?

Obviously, this is all literary license. Very little is known of who witnessed the crucifixion beyond the short list we have in scripture. The only Disciple listed is John, and he lists himself in his own letter, which is something he had a propensity for doing. The more important question would be, who was not present the day Jesus died?

Thomas the Disciple was most likely not present while Jesus was dying on the Cross. A common belief among commentators is that he disappeared for several days following the arrest and trial of Jesus. We know Thomas for other reasons. He's quite famous, even infamous for being the personification of doubt. Doubting Thomas. If we play *Word Association* with Biblical characters and doubt comes up, so will the name Thomas. But, is this accurate? Better yet, is this fair?

If you're willing to go with a cursory dive into the story you could peg Thomas for a doubter, but if that's the depth any of us choose to go we will miss an amazing story. So, let's take a few minutes and give Thomas the benefit of the doubt (sorry, couldn't resist).

The New Testament mentions Thomas in only eight passages, four of which are lists of the apostles. If not for the letter of John, Thomas would be a name on a list and little more. Thanks to John's letter we have a personal, albeit concise glimpse into this Disciple's life. Thomas had a twin sibling, hence the name Didymos, and Thomas itself comes from the Aramaic word meaning twin, so it could be said he had more of a nickname than actual name, well before he was given the full nickname Doubting Thomas.

The big question facing any honest study into Thomas is this: Does he deserve the everlasting infamy of being the man synonymous with doubt? It's his. Visit any 3rd Grade Sunday School class and ask about the disciple named Thomas, and you'll hear, "Oh, Doubting Thomas." It's engrained. But, does he deserve the negative load of being the world's all-time chief doubter. In my estimation, no. Thomas was much more complex than simply being a skeptical man with pathological doubt issues. *Pathological?* Uh, yes, check out how commentators, theologians and various clergy have described him:

Thomas is a pessimist. Some people who rejoice see a glass half full, but Thomas sees it half empty.

Thomas is a man of "gloomy spirit, prone to look on the dark side of everything, and live in the shade."

There was little in him of the sunny, bright and hopeful.

Thomas was a negative person; he was a worry wart, a brooder, tended to be anxious and angst ridden. He was like Eeyore in *Winnie the Pooh*. He anticipated the worst all the time.

Thomas had a “twin-issue,” was the least bright of the two siblings, leading to an inferiority complex that made him gloomy.

The above characterizations were made by persons who stretched well beyond their disciplines and what scripture provides us on Thomas. There is only so much that can be read into anyone’s encounter with Jesus in scripture. This is especially true if you overlook two earlier stories about Thomas interacting with Jesus and major solely on his most familiar and defining encounter. And please, never bring a beloved Pooh character into something this negative!

Thomas, like Peter in some ways, and greatly unlike Peter in other ways, did not deal with the death of Jesus well. He too saw his Jesus-life die with Jesus. His world order and grip on how life would turn out began to shatter the night Jesus was arrested. *Jesus talked about dying, but like this? At the hands of Rome and the Pharisees? The Kingdom is at hand. That’s what He said. Where is the Kingdom He said was coming? What do we do now?* Unlike Peter who chose to stay close to Jesus after his arrest (and over the course of a few hours deny he knew him three times) Thomas seems to have disappeared for several days. We get no explanation for his absence, but he does return, which is remarkable for a *glass-half-empty, pessimistic, brooding worry wart!*

David Lose sees Thomas as a realist rather than a doubter: “He doesn’t doubt as much as have a need to see, sense and feel his way through an issue.” We would see this as being pragmatic, which is something we can see in Thomas in the two “other” times he is featured in John’s account.

In the Lazarus saga it was Thomas who spoke for the group and exhibited a Peter-like boldness:

*Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick he stayed where he was two more days. Then he said to his disciples, “Let us go to back to Judea.” “But Rabbi,” they said, “a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you and yet you are going back there?” Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day*

*will not stumble, for he sees by the world's light. It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light.” (John 11:5-10)*

Obviously, Jesus had just given one of his patented Jesus-like answers to a very basic question about the potential danger of returning to Judea. Somewhere in his answer he was saying, “*Gear up guys, we’re going back to check on Lazarus and his sisters.*” The disciples had every right to be afraid for Jesus and for themselves. They faced an extremely dangerous trip and they weren’t yet spiritually savvy enough to know that death by stoning was not how Jesus would die. Ignorance, however, was not bliss in this case. Thomas spoke for the group: “*Let’s go too and die with Jesus*” (John 11:16).

Were these the words of a serial doubter? Would a serial doubter be the lone spokesperson for this group of disciples, a group that included Peter and John? Would a perpetually skeptical, anxiety-ridden pessimist be the first disciple willing to put his life on the line to follow Jesus to a possible death? No, these are not the words or actions of a person mired in doubt. Lose was right that Thomas was more of a realist than a doubter. One who doubts is not likely to be the bold spokesperson for a group of twelve followers of a charismatic leader (who happens to be God). Thomas seems to have been willing to say out loud what the other eleven were thinking but were leaving unsaid.

Let’s jump to Thomas’ penultimate encounter with Jesus as John records it in chapter 20. The ten disciples, minus the now deceased Judas and the absent Thomas, are huddled together in a locked house. They are basically in hiding, fearful of the same Hebrew leaders who arrested Jesus. Were they believers in the Risen Messiah Jesus, or were they as complicit in doubt as we accuse Thomas of being? So, Jesus comes to them... through the door, *like literally through* the locked door.

*On the evening of the first day of the week (Sunday), when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” After He said this He showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” (John 20:19-22)*

If, and this is a big IF, Thomas had been with his guys that day he would not have gone down in history as the most famous doubter of all time. It was only after Jesus appeared to them, provided them supernatural peace (Shalom), and gifted them

with a portion of the Holy Spirit, that they believed. When Thomas returned they were ecstatic and shared with him their encounter with the now-alive Jesus. It might have gone something like this: *Thomas, we've seen Jesus! He's alive! He came to us. We touched him, we saw His scars. We saw Him die, but now He is alive. Thomas He's alive!* It did go like this:

*Now Thomas was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But Thomas said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in His hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe it" (John 20:25b).*

So, did Thomas say, *"You guys are crazy! You've been into the Passover wine again. I'm out!"* No, Thomas stayed with them for 8 days. He heard just enough of what he wanted, even needed to hear, so he stayed.

Exactly eight days later Jesus returned and spoke to Thomas:

*"Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20: 26-28)*

Imagine what those eight days were like for Thomas. The other disciples had seen the Risen Jesus, had been given the peace/shalom of God and a partial gift of the Holy Spirit (the full gift would flow at Pentecost). They could better discern spiritual issues in new ways, which means they now believed Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah and that He did indeed overcome death. Thomas had not experienced any of those things. His time had not yet come, which was his fault entirely. He chose to leave rather than stay and ride out the crisis, thus he was still grappling with the reality of Jesus coming back from the dead. He knew people could rise from the grave. He'd seen it. Lazarus came back and he was quite dead, like four days-dead, but Jesus made that happen. But if Jesus is in the grave, who can bring Him back? *No, I just can't see how that can happen. I simply can't believe it unless I see it myself. You say you saw the nail prints? You say you saw his side where the spear went in? I'll need to see it too.*

William Barclay was a big fan of Thomas. Rather than cite his doubt as a negative, or a character flaw, he believed Thomas had two great virtues. First, Thomas absolutely refused to say that he believed when he did not believe; that he understood what he did not understand; that he felt a need to be sure to the highest degree possible as often as possible. Second, when he was sure of

something, he went in the whole way. His commitment was absolute. There was no halfway with Thomas.

Let's stop punishing Thomas for his doubt (or difficulty of accepting something so greatly supernatural). Terrell Carter writes, *"Mary Magdalene, Peter and John either did not fully believe or fully understand what had occurred the first time they saw the empty tomb. Why should Thomas not be allowed the same courtesy?"*

It's also possible the Kingdom needed a Doubting Thomas (or a Realist Thomas as I'm most comfortable with). Without Thomas we would not have had the now immortal Jesus line:

*Jesus said to Thomas, "Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed" (John 20: 29).*

Thomas became the line between those who had known the pre-Cross Jesus and the post-tomb Resurrected Lord, and all who follow, including us. He had trouble reconciling the two. When the One who could raise the dead dies, who could possibly raise Him from the grave? When Thomas came to realize Jesus was indeed God it all came together. He became an Easter miracle and over time (it is reported) he changed the world, first in Syria and then in India where he died a martyr's death. He was willing to die for Jesus and in the end he did. This is not the life of a serial pessimist, angst-ridden, pathological doubter. He saw and believed, and because of his need to see, we can believe without seeing. Let's do that line one more time: Thomas saw and believed, and because of his need to both see and believe, we can believe without seeing. For us it's all faith and trust.

A quick story: I walked down a traditional Baptist church aisle on Easter Sunday morning when I was nine years old. I did not arrive that morning planning to make a profession of faith, or in our parlance, *get saved*. It wasn't even my church. I went to my cousin's church that Easter because it was their turn to host the larger family get together. Even though it is an Easter far removed I can still remember much of it clearly. I sat on the second or third row from the front on the end, pulpit left. There was a large window to my left. The pastor was factory-direct for small church Alabama, a bit chubby and quite bald, but a fiery preacher. His sermon was a mix of the sacrifice of Jesus and the absolute reality that if we choose to reject His sacrifice that day, right then and there, we could, with total certainty, burn for eternity in hell. I was nine years old but he had my complete, undivided attention. Then came the clincher: *"The opportunities to accept the sacrifice of Jesus are fleeting. It's like a bird landing on a windowsill, perching there for a few seconds, then flying away."*

For reasons I can only attribute to God I looked to my left to the window. A bird, not sure what make and model bird, landed on the windowsill and looked at me. O.K., I cannot say with 100% certainty that the bird looked at me as I do not know a lot about ornithological ophthalmology, but that bird *looked* at me. And I knew it was a God-thing. I did not know all my needs, only that I had needs, and these were needs only God the Father through God the Son could meet in my life. And the Easter miracle began. My Easter miracle began.

Peter was an Easter miracle in process. Thomas was an Easter miracle in process. There is much to be learned from both their experiences. But, never forget that you and I are also Easter miracles in process, unfinished products, so on the good days and on the not-so-good-days, embrace your unique story.

And remember, it's O.K. to doubt. Doubt is simply looking for the light while never being content with the darkness!

Dr. Michael McCullar  
Formations Pastor  
Johns Creek Baptist Church