

WHAT JESUS SAID TO THOMAS**JOHN 20:24-31**

Thomas, one of Jesus' twelve original disciples, has gotten a bum rap. You recall his famous nickname: Doubting Thomas. But was he the only person in the Bible who doubted God? I don't think so. The Lord told Abraham the land of Canaan would be his possession, but Abraham said, "O Sovereign LORD, how can I be sure that I will actually possess it?" (Gen. 15:8 NLT) Sounds like doubt to me. The Lord told the reluctant leader, Gideon, to attack the enemies of Israel. Gideon said, "If you are truly going to help me, show me a sign to prove that it is really the Lord speaking to me." (Jud. 6:17 NLT) Sounds like doubt to me. When John the Baptist heard about what Jesus was saying and doing, he asked the question, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Matt. 11:3 NLT) Sounds like doubt to me. Or how about the very first Christians? After all the miracles they'd witnessed, you'd think it would be impossible for them to doubt. But in the book of Acts, there's a story about a group of them gathered to pray for the release of Peter who had been thrown in jail. God answered their prayer miraculously. Peter knocked on the door of where they were holding their prayer meeting. A servant girl answered, saw who it was, and ran back to the group telling them Peter was right there outside their door. What was their response? "You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel." (Acts 12:15 NLT) Sounds like doubt to me!

The Bible is full of people who doubted God. But Thomas has been singled out as the epitome of doubt. Why? When the risen Jesus first appeared to His disciples as a group, Thomas was absent. Later, when they told him they'd seen Jesus, he famously doubted their story. We're in the midst of a series of message on the real last words of Jesus. No, not the words He spoke just before He died on the cross, but instead the things Jesus said for about forty days between His resurrection and His ascension. This morning I want us to focus on Jesus' encounter with Thomas. Actually, the most memorable fact about Thomas isn't his doubt, but his faith. True, his faith began with doubt. But without that initial doubt, Thomas' faith would likely have never become strong, deep, and real. What's memorable about Thomas shouldn't be how he got embarrassed for his doubts. Instead, what we should remember about Thomas was the strong faith that emerged out of his sincere doubts. This marvelous story of what happened and what was said between Jesus and Thomas gives us, first of all...

A PICTURE OF SINCERE DOUBT.

One of the many wonderful aspects of God's Word is its complete honesty about the people in the Bible. It presents the good and the bad as well as their strengths and weaknesses. Thomas was no different. Do you remember the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead? When Jesus got the news of Lazarus' terminal illness, He decided to go and see his friend although it was dangerous to do so because of mounting opposition to Jesus. Thomas' reaction was interesting. "Thomas said to his fellow disciples, 'Let's go, too—and die with Jesus.'" (Jo. 11:16 NLT) What does that commend tell us about Thomas? Yes, it was a kind of negative, gloomy observation.

But it also revealed a man who was very loyal and very devoted to Jesus. Thomas was probably a firm believer in the fatalistic observation we've heard often, "If something can go wrong, it will." On another occasion, Jesus told His disciples that He would be leaving them soon, but they knew the place where He was going. Enter Thomas. "No, we don't know, Lord," Thomas said. "We have no idea where you are going, so how can we know the way?" (Jo. 14:5 NLT) What does that comment reveal about Thomas? Perhaps he wasn't the most spiritually perceptive disciple in the bunch, but he was very honest, very straightforward. Like every other person who's ever lived, Thomas had good points and bad ones, personality strengths as well as weaknesses.

We aren't told why Thomas was absent the first time the risen Jesus appeared to the disciples as a group – the story we reflected on last week. When he rejoined the group, I imagine Thomas thought everyone would be thoroughly dejected, depressed, and discouraged like he was. But to Thomas' astonishment, they were absolutely ecstatic with joy and wonder. "Oh, Thomas, you just missed Him! Jesus is alive! He was just here with us. We didn't believe it was Jesus at first, but then He showed us the scars from the nails. And he ate fish with us! Look, here's His plate with some fish bones and pieces of bread still on it. Can you believe it? Jesus is alive!" Now, nothing can ruin a good case of the emotional blues more quickly than people saying you don't need to feel blue after all. Can't you see Thomas shaking his head in disbelief and the other disciples trying everything possible to convince him of what and who they'd seen? I can imagine Thomas' voice rising – full of sadness and bitterness – and hearing him say, "I won't believe it unless I see the nail wounds in his hands, put my fingers into them, and place my hand into the wound in his side." (Jo. 20:25 NLT)

There are at least two kinds of doubt. There's sinful doubt. What does it look like? Sinful doubt can't afford to admit the truth. People who practice sinful doubt reject Jesus under the guise there's no historical proof of the resurrection. Or they might claim Jesus was misunderstood by His followers. They just made Jesus into someone He never claimed to be. Or, sinful doubt will reject the Christian faith because a loving God would never allow suffering in the world or because some Christians have done stupid and sinful things over the centuries. Sinful doubt isn't truly interested in getting honest answers to honest questions. Sinful doubt throws up lots of smokescreens in order to dodge the real issues. It says things like, "The Christian faith is built on myths. It's not historical. It's unscientific. Besides, there's just too much evil and suffering in the world to believe in a God, much less a loving and all-powerful God. And, the Bible? So full of contradictions!" Sinful doubt insists on absolute certainty concerning every possible question before it's OK to believe in much of anything.

I like the story of a pastor traveling by train. He was enjoying his lunch in the dining car. An atheist recognized he was a pastor because of the clerical collar he was wearing. "I see you're a minister," he said. "Yes, I'm a minister of the Gospel," the pastor confirmed. "I suppose you believe the Bible," said the atheist. "I certainly do believe the Bible to be the Word of God," the pastor affirmed. "But aren't there things in the Bible you can't explain?" The pastor said, "Yes, there are places in the Bible too hard for me

to understand.” Thinking he had the pastor cornered, the atheist asked, “Well, what do you do then?” The pastor was eating his dinner which happened to be a tasty fish but with plenty of bones. Looking up, he answered, “I do just the same as when eating this fish. When I come to the bones, I put them to the side of my plate and go on enjoying my lunch. I leave the bones for some fool to choke on.”

Sinful doubt is intellectually dishonest. Someone in sinful doubt can't afford to believe Jesus is who He claimed to be or that the Christian faith is true. He or she knows instinctively if it is true, his or her values, priorities, lifestyle, and life's direction will go through an incredible revolution. The issue isn't truth, but pride. The issue isn't reason, but self-sufficiency. The issue isn't being scientific, but who will control how I live my life. Who's going to run my life? Who's going to call the shots? Who will I answer to? Those are the real issues. When a man or woman says in their heart of hearts, “I don't want God telling me how to live my life. I don't want to have to answer to Him or anyone else,” you can be sure sinful doubt is in control of their life. No argument, no evidence, and no amount of reason will penetrate it.

Can Christians get infected with sinful doubt? Sadly, we can. The Bible says, “Be careful then, dear brothers and sisters. Make sure that your own hearts are not evil and unbelieving, turning you away from the living God.” (Heb. 3:12 NLT) Followers of Jesus can have significant pockets of resistance to God in our lives – places where we still reject Jesus' authority and control. In essence, we say to God, “No, I don't want You telling me what to do in that area of my life.” Or, “That part of my lifestyle or behavior is off limits to You, Jesus. I call the shots there.” It can be anything – our ambitions, how we handle money, our need to control others, our temper, our sexuality, our self-centeredness. In fact, as I review my own relationship with God through the years, one way to describe it is a gradual revelation of new areas where I have been resisting God, where I have denied Him access and control, and where I have rebelled against Him, but also of God's gentle, loving, and gracious insistence that I surrender all that to Him.

But there is such a thing as sincere doubt. I like how someone named Henry Drummond put it. “We are born questioners. Look at the wonderment of a little child in its eyes before it can speak. The child's great word when it begins to speak is ‘why.’ Every child is full of every kind of question.... Respect doubt for its origins. It is an inevitable thing. It is not a thing to be crushed. It is a part of man as God made him. Doubt is the prelude to knowledge.” Sincere doubt can be good and useful.

I believe Thomas suffered from sincere doubt rather than sinful doubt. What does it look like? Thomas' doubt was the result of a broken and crushed heart. There was nothing rebellious in it. It wasn't a matter of pride or a question of who was in control. He wanted Jesus to be alive, but Thomas was a man who had to face the facts. You don't just believe something because you'd like it be true or because it makes you feel better! But the problem here was that Thomas didn't have all the facts. His doubts were sincere, but ignorant. I believe God respects sincere doubt. Some people can have sincere intellectual doubts about Jesus or the Christian faith. They need the

opportunity to examine the facts and consider the evidence. They should be given that opportunity without judging or ridiculing them. There are other people who have suffered a great deal of hurt in life and their wounds make it very hard to believe in a loving, gracious, and good God. They need to be given the opportunity to find God in and through their pain. It may take a while for God to break through all that emotional scar tissue and reveal Himself to them.

There are some essential differences between sinful doubt and sincere doubt. Sincere doubt is always temporary, because it truly wants to believe. But sinful doubt refuses to believe. Sincere doubt isn't satisfied by pat answers and pious observations, true enough, but it will respond to good answers and thoughtful observations. Sinful doubt rejects any and every answer or observation. Sinful doubt ultimately strangles any and all faith. But sincere doubt can actually stretch us and make us grow spiritually. It can lead us to grasp what's true which actually strengthens our faith. Whatever you sincerely doubted you now know to be true and so you hold onto it all the more. Sincere doubt can be a very good thing. Thomas might be the best example. His sincere doubt led him right into a strong faith. That's what we have in John 20.

A PICTURE OF STRONG FAITH.

We tend to focus on Thomas' doubt. It's easy to overlook his faith. When Jesus appeared to all the disciples again eight days later, Thomas was among them that time. What an encounter that must have been! Jesus said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and look at my hands. Put your hand into the wound in my side. Don't be faithless any longer. Believe!" (Jo. 20:27 NLT) Notice Thomas didn't take Jesus up on His offer to examine His wounds. He didn't really need to conduct an empirical investigation after all. If his doubt had been sinful, Thomas could have still chosen to reject what His eyes saw. He could have remained in his doubt. But all Thomas' sincere doubt and sad heart needed was a glimpse of the real and risen Jesus. Then from deep within his soul bubbled up a river of joy and a fountain of understanding. It expressed itself in what might be the most powerful and accurate confession of Jesus found anywhere in the Bible. "My Lord and my God!" (Jo. 20:28 NLT) You just can't improve on Thomas' great observation. My Lord and my God. It says it all. Ironically, the very person we often characterize as the epitome of doubt – old Doubting Thomas – offered up perhaps the greatest statement of faith ever. My Lord and my God.

This story underlines some great truths about faith. A strong faith is absolutely necessary if you want to have a relationship with God. The Bible says, "And it is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him." (Heb. 11:6 NLT) On this occasion, Jesus said to Thomas, "You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who believe without seeing me." (Jo. 20:29 NLT) He contradicted the idea that it's necessary to see the risen Jesus with your physical eyes in order to know the truth about Him. In fact, those who haven't seen the risen Jesus literally are, in a certain way, more blest, nobler, and purer in their faith.

Some people will say, “Oh, I’d definitely start believing in Jesus if He appeared to me in some special way like he did for Thomas. I might believe if I witnessed some kind of miracle.” But the fact is we witness miracles around us every day – miracles involving this amazing world God has created, miracles that point to God’s intervention and protection – and yet many still fail to believe. I read an article once on inflammation and the incredible way the human body is designed to ward off infections and to deal with harmful bacteria and germs that infiltrate it. Very smart people still cling to the ridiculous idea that all of the incredible sophistication found in the human body just happened by random chance over millions and billions of years rather than through the hands of an all knowing and all powerful God.

Do you remember the story of Moses and Pharaoh in the Bible? Pharaoh probably witnessed the most awesome display of God’s miraculous power ever granted a human being, but it never changed his heart. He still refused to let God’s people leave their slavery in Egypt. Is more information really the issue? More proof? More evidence? A supernatural experience? God doesn’t save anyone through information, proof, evidence, or experiences. He comes to us through the channel of faith – faith in Jesus – who He is and what He did. We discover a relationship with God through faith not sight – faith in His goodness and character – not because we’ve had something proved to us or we’ve experience something supernatural or sensational.

A strong faith must be deeply personal. Notice again what Thomas said here, “My Lord and my God.” (Jo. 20:28 NLT) Thomas instantly perceived that Jesus being risen and alive changed everything about his own life forever. “This Jesus is God - my God. He’s the One I will worship, adore, and follow. This Jesus has every right to control my life, guide my life, and shape my life. He isn’t just Lord and God in some vague, detached way. He’s my Lord and I’m called to serve Him forever.” At that moment, Thomas gave as much as he knew about himself to as much as he knew about Jesus. His faith became deeply personal. When we give ourselves to Jesus, we, too, give as much as we know about ourselves to as much as we know about Jesus at the time. We surrender and submit to Him. And that’s also how we keep on living with Jesus for the rest of our lives. We just keep on giving as much as we know about ourselves to as much as we know about Jesus. The better you know yourself and the better you know Jesus, the more you surrender and give of yourself to Him.

A strong faith is based on facts not fantasies. No, it’s not important if you or I have literally seen the risen Jesus. But it’s vitally important several people did, in fact, see the risen Jesus with their own eyes. We’re not asked to believe a fairy tale, a myth, or a fable. If Thomas and the other disciples had not seen the risen Jesus literally, there never would have been a Christian faith at all. Our faith is based on solid, factual, eyewitness reports of people who saw Jesus alive and well after His crucifixion. John wrote here, “The disciples saw Jesus do many other miraculous signs in addition to the ones recorded in this book. But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life

by the power of his name.” (Jo. 20:30-31 NLT) He meant your faith and mine is based on the actual words and deeds of Jesus – not some fable someone made up.

A strong faith makes spiritual blessings available to us. It’s by faith you and I become God’s child. The Bible says, “But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God.” (Jo. 1:12 NLT) It’s by faith you and I receive the gift of eternal life. Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, anyone who believes has eternal life.” (Jo. 6:47 NLT) It’s by faith your spiritual desires and mine can be realized. Again, Jesus said, “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again. Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” (Jo. 6:35 NLT) And, it’s by faith your life and mine can change and become effective in God’s work in this world. Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, anyone who believes in me will do the same works I have done, and even greater works, because I am going to be with the Father.” (Jo. 14:12 NLT)

Lew Wallace lived in the 1800s. He was an agnostic spiritually and denied Christianity. He was an educated man and had a reputation as a good thinker. One of his closest friends who also was an agnostic encouraged Wallace to do research and write a book proving Jesus never lived and that He couldn’t have inspired the teachings found in the New Testament. His friend said the book was much needed and would make Wallace famous. The suggestion made a deep impression on Wallace. He went home and told his wife. She was a follower of Jesus and, of course, didn’t like the idea.

But Wallace decided to write such a book anyway and he began to collect material for it from everywhere. Several years were spent researching and writing. He’d written nearly four chapters when it became clear to Wallace that Jesus was just as real a person as anyone who had ever lived in ancient times. This conviction became a certainty. He knew Jesus had lived, and so he found himself in an awkward position. Here he’d begun to write a book proving Jesus had never lived, but now it was obvious Wallace’s assumption was inaccurate based on the evidence.

But then another pattern of thought emerged. If Jesus was a real person, could He also then be the Son of God and the Savior of the world? Gradually that conviction began to grow within Wallace until one evening he fell on his knees to pray for the first time in his life. He asked God to reveal Himself to him, forgive his sins, and help him to become a follower of Jesus. He apparently spent the whole night in reflection and prayer, because when morning came, he went to his bedroom, woke his wife up, and told her that he had received Jesus as his Lord and Savior. She said, “Oh, Lew, I have prayed for this ever since you told me of your purpose to write this book. I prayed you would find Him while you wrote it.”

“After six years given to the impartial investigation of Christianity as to its truth or falsity, I have come to the deliberate conclusion that Jesus Christ is the Messiah of the Jews, the Savior of the world, and my personal Savior.” Those were the words of Lew Wallace, who went on to become the governor of New Mexico. He started to write a book against Jesus and in the process became a follower of Jesus. Wallace did end up

writing a very famous, but a different book. It was a masterpiece and the crowning glory of his life's work. All that research into Jesus – His life and times - found a positive and wonderful outcome. The book is called *Ben Hur* and it was the basis for one of the greatest movies of all time by the same name. The movie was remade and updated in 2016. The next time you watch that amazing chariot race in either the old or newer versions of the *Ben Hur* movies, I want you to remember the book they were based on was written by a man who wanted to discredit Jesus, but instead became convinced He was the greatest person who has ever lived.

So, what's the point? Like the disciple, Thomas, Lew Wallace had sincere doubts about Jesus. And just like Thomas, Wallace's sincere doubts became the doorway to a strong and lasting faith.