

April 19, 2020

God Sightings: Thomas
Why Did Thomas Doubt?
John 20:19-31

Opening Words: When was the last time you saw God? There is no other way to explain it. It must be God. It happens all the time. It can happen in the normal routine of life, or a random act of kindness. Sometimes, it happens in a miraculous or spectacular way. Sometimes, it happens with a new insight or perspective. We call those experiences a "God Sighting." So, let me ask you the question again. When was the last time you experienced God? Our God Sightings are important because they remind us that God is active in our world.

This is sermon number one in my new three-part sermon series, *God Sightings*. The Gospel of John contains three God Sightings. Each one is miraculous in nature. In each case, the resurrected Jesus came and stood before individuals, teaching them lessons which have lasted for the ages. Next week, we will look at the story of the miraculous catch of fish and in two weeks we will look at Jesus' appearance to the disciples on Easter evening. Today, we look at Thomas' encounter with the resurrected Jesus. Our Gospel lesson is John 20:19-31. Let me call this message *Why Did Thomas Doubt?*

John 20:19-31 On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." ²² And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." ²⁴ Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he 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." ²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁷ 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." ²⁸ Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Voltaire (1694-1778) once said, "*Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is absurd.*" Experience has taught me, he is correct. Your doubts do not make you unique. Your doubts make you one of the crowd. If you will admit you have your doubts, then say, **"Amen!"**

We find ourselves in the twentieth chapter of John. Our reading begins when the resurrected Jesus appears to ten of the twelve disciples had experienced the resurrected Jesus. The two who were missing were Judas Iscariot, who had committed suicide, and Thomas, who was absent. We do not know where Thomas was, but we know where he should have been there. He should have been with the other disciples who encountered the resurrected Jesus. The others must have told him about their experience with the resurrected Jesus, but their words were not enough. When the others tell him of their experience, he has his doubts. In verse 25, Thomas says something he must have come to regret. He said, *"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."* For generations, people have judged Thomas for those words.

Except for Judas Iscariot, who betrayed our Lord, no other disciple has been judged more harshly by history than Thomas. It is truly unfair. His life was filled with more than that single sentence. Just think about it for a moment. He was selected by Jesus himself to be one of the disciples. That means he traveled with Jesus for three years. He heard the lessons. He felt his authority. He saw the miracles. He was excited on Palm Sunday and devastated on Good Friday. Tradition tells us after Pentecost, he went to India to tell them about the greatest life that ever lived, Jesus! Even his death had meaning. Tradition tells us, he died in service to the Lord, martyred with a spear. He had an incredible life, but we remember him for one sentence, *"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."* Why is it we all remember that one negative? Could it be that we all point to that one moment of doubt because it was the one moment, we are the most like Thomas? You are not the first person to wrestle with doubt, and our generation is not the first to wrestle with doubt.

American psychologist Carl Rogers (1902-1987) was 22 years old when he entered Union Theological Seminary in New York City in 1924. While there, he participated in a seminar organized to explore religious doubts. Rogers later said of the group, *"The majority of members...in thinking their way through questions they had raised, thought themselves right out of religious work. I was one."* This is the point: Ours is not the first generation to have questions and doubts. And ours will not be the last. Let me ask you these two questions: Do you have a few questions for God? Do you have a few doubts? There is nothing wrong with questions and doubts. These are signs of a growing faith. However, this is the question of the day:

Why did Thomas doubt? Throughout the centuries, many have tried to answer that question. I have my theories. Maybe you have your theories? James W. Moore (1938-2019) was an author and the pastor of the St. Luke's United Methodist Church in Houston, Texas for many years, has his theories. It is his theories I want to look at today. I believe they have some merit. They speak to me; I hope they speak to you too. If you are ready to look at several reasons why Thomas doubted, say, **"Amen!"**

Perhaps, Thomas doubted because he had dropped out? In other words, Thomas had some doubts because Thomas was not present. The scripture says it clearly. Let me say it again. Thomas was missing when the resurrected Jesus appeared to the other ten disciples. If Thomas had been present, then he would have experienced the resurrected Jesus. Then, he would not have doubted. In other words, he doubted because he was absent. That is worth considering. We still see it today. How many people do you know who have dropped out of church? How many people do you know who have doubts because they have poor personal theology? They have doubts because they do not understand God's ways. How many church dropouts do you know?

When I was young, my best friend was Jimmy Thompson. I have talked about him in the past. He lived about five doors up from my family's home and we did everything together. I liked being at his house because we were never supervised. He liked coming to my house because it was clean. Every time my parents said, "Russell, you can bring a friend," I brought Jimmy Thompson. Our friendship came to an end when we were sophomores in high school. His mother was going through an ugly divorce. Jimmy rebelled and was sent to live with his sister, Muriel. She did her best, but she had her own problems. Jimmy decided to drop out of school one day, and he never returned. The last time Jimmy and I talked, I said, "Jimmy, you have to go back to school." He said, "Russ, anything I need to know I can teach myself." (Can you imagine? He had a ninth-grade education.) I have not seen Jimmy in years, but others tell me he has a hard life. The best job he has ever had was bagging groceries at the corner market. I think and pray for Jimmy every May 30, his birthday. I believe his life would have been easier if he had not dropped out of school.

How many people do you know who have dropped out of church? I cannot blame them 100% of the time. The church is not a perfect place. The truth be told, there are times church is downright ugly. There are times when we fight amongst ourselves. There are times when we gossip about one another. There are times when small groups like to run the whole show. There have been times when pastors do some horrible things. I know those things, but I also know this. There is no excuse for dropping out of church. Despite all our problems, church is still the best place to learn about God. If you do not go to church, then where do you learn about God? If you are not going to church, then you are self-taught, like Jimmy Thompson. You will be just as successful in your spiritual development as Jimmy Thompson was in life. Thomas doubted because he was not present. For a short time, he had dropped out. Church dropouts are missing the whole Christian experience. No wonder they have doubts and questions. They simply do not know God's ways. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

Perhaps, Thomas doubted because he gave in. In other words, Thomas had some doubts because he let science become his final answer. You cannot really blame him. The resurrection of Jesus is a miracle! It cannot be explained by science. If you do not believe in miracles, then you cannot believe in the resurrection. Do you know anyone

who says people who believe in miracles are uninformed or uneducated? Do you know anyone who has given in?

Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), the chief writer of the Declaration of Independence and Third President of the United States, gave in to science. He had his Bible re-written. He wanted everything that could not be scientifically explained taken out. Just think about it for a moment. Jefferson dismissed the virgin birth. Jefferson dismissed the healing stories. Jefferson dismissed the resurrection, which, I believe, dismissed him from the Christian faith. I have seen copies of his Bible. Jefferson's Bible is approximately one-third the size of your Bible and mine. Just think of the things that he missed!

I hope you do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that science is bad. I am not against science. I believe it is one of the paths to truth and knowledge. However, I do not believe it is the only path to truth and knowledge. Some of the most powerful forces in our world today cannot be explained by science. Can anyone here give me the scientific formula for love? Can anyone here give me the scientific formula for honesty or courage? There is no scientific formula for faith, goodness, or humility. There is not a scientific explanation for patience, self-control, or kindness. You cannot put mercy or grace into a test tube. Those things cannot be scientifically explained, but we see examples of those things every day. Perhaps, Thomas doubted because he gave in to science? Science is good, but it is not the final answer. The final answer is always God. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" Perhaps, Thomas doubted because he dropped out or gave in.

Perhaps, Thomas doubted because he gave up. In other words, Thomas had some doubts because he let death be the final answer. The scripture does not tell us where Thomas was when Jesus appeared to the others. However, I have a good guess. I believe, he was doing what many do when they are upset. They walk to get some fresh air, clear their minds, and think. If you use your sanctified imagination you can see him walking down every back street of Jerusalem. He is trying to answer the question, "How did it go so wrong, so fast?" As he walked, he couldn't believe it was over. He was devastated. He thought it was over when Jesus died! However, he was wrong. It was not over. It was just the beginning. Why? Because, Jesus was not dead. He had been resurrected; he was alive! Do you know anyone who lets death be the final word? Do you know anyone who has given up?

Twenty-five years ago, today, on April 19, 1995, Timothy McVeigh attacked a federal building in downtown Oklahoma City. It is hard to believe so much time has passed. The picture that caught my attention from that day was of a firefighter carrying a little girl away from the destruction. We found out later that the little girl was one year old. She celebrated her first and only birthday the day before the bombing. Reporters asked that little girl's mother, "How can you go on?" She responded, "The only thing that keeps me going is the fact that my little girl is in heaven. Someday, I am going to see her again." Can anyone here relate to that mother? Your life would come to a grinding

halt, if not for the belief that you will see your loved one again? Perhaps Thomas doubted because he was overcome with grief. Never forget! Death is not the final answer. The final answer is Jesus! And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"** I do not know why Thomas doubted, but he did. Do not be hard on him. We all have questions and doubts.

Years ago, I received a phone call from a young man by the name of Derrick. He was a student at Youngstown State University, who was enrolled in a religion class. His assignment was to call a minister in the area and ask some questions. I was more than happy to answer his questions. However, before the first question was asked Derrick wanted to make a confession. He said, "Rev. Adams, I don't want to scare you, but I have some doubts about the faith. I have a few questions." I said, "Derrick, the fact that you have questions doesn't scare me. The only ones who scare me are the people that say they have all the answers." Do you remember what Voltaire once said? He said, *"Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is absurd."* So, ask all the questions you want. It is the sign of a growing faith. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**