

The best instruction I ever received about studying scripture was to forget the nicknames we commonly use for stories or characters: the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, Doubting Thomas. They tend to make us think we already know what those stories are about, which makes it harder for us to learn from them. Sometimes what we think we know isn't even in the story. Jesus never calls the Samaritan "good" or the son "prodigal". In today's gospel, Jesus does tell Thomas *Do not doubt*, but even that command, taken out of context, obscures what is happening between Jesus and Thomas.

According to John, after the resurrection, Jesus meets Mary Magdalene outside the tomb, and she returns to tell the rest of the disciples, *I have seen the Lord*. Later that same evening, while Thomas is absent, Jesus appears to the rest of the gathered disciples, who then also tell Thomas *We have seen the Lord*. We have no idea where Thomas was when this was going on. He could have been in the temple praying, at the market buying everyone else dinner, dancing in a night club, helping a little old lady cross the street, or answering nature's call in the little disciples' room. It doesn't matter where he was: he wasn't there. But now everyone he knows has seen Jesus alive, except for him.

Thomas' requirement for believing what everyone else claims to have seen does seem a bit over the top: *Unless I can stick my finger in the nail marks and my hand in his side, I will not believe*. Gross. But John tells us that Jesus at least showed his hands and side to the other disciples, even if they looked without touching. Having not been in the garden or the locked room with Jesus, Thomas doesn't really know what everyone else saw: was it a vision, a collective hallucination, a ghost? If Thomas can touch Jesus, he'll know this is bodily resurrection, that Jesus truly has risen from the dead.

Thomas is remembered for doubting, but all things being equal, he didn't doubt any more than anyone else. Nobody believed based on hearsay alone: the women encounter the resurrected Jesus and then go tell the disciples, but the disciples consider it an "idle tale" and don't believe them. Mary reports that the tomb is empty, but Peter and the beloved disciple *race each other* to the cemetery to see the empty tomb for themselves. Mary says *I have seen the Lord*, but the disciples keep hiding until Jesus shows up to them in person. Everyone else saw Jesus; for them, it wasn't a matter of believing what they heard, it was not refusing what they could see in front of them. So Thomas doesn't doubt while everyone else believes; everyone else had an experience that Thomas didn't have. Yet.

After a week, Jesus comes back and shows himself to Thomas in the same way he had shown himself to everyone else. Jesus offers to let Thomas touch his wounds, since that's what Thomas said he needed to believe, though in spite of what various artists have rather graphically depicted, John doesn't indicate that Thomas took him up on that offer. Jesus tells him, *do not doubt but believe*, but Thomas doesn't need any more convincing: once he sees the risen Jesus himself, he immediately proclaims, *My Lord and my God!*

Jesus' next words are often read as a criticism of Thomas: *Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe*. But it would be hard to

argue that Thomas is not blessed; Thomas got to see the risen Jesus in the flesh; he got exactly what he asked for. But on the grand cosmic timeline, Thomas was the last person who came to believe in the resurrection through a physical encounter with the risen Jesus. The ones who have not (physically) seen and yet have come to believe—that's us. John tells us that's why he wrote the book, so we would come to believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that we would have life in his name.

It sort of sounds like John is saying to us that we've got to read about the Jesus other people experienced and just believe. But that's not what John says happened to Thomas. Jesus shows up for Thomas in the way Thomas need him to, so Thomas didn't have to rely on what everyone else said. Since we're living after Jesus' ascension, we're not going to run into him physically, but God still comes to us in the ways that we need so that we can live our lives in faith. This story is not a demand, "Don't be a doubting Thomas; you have to believe without seeing." This story is a promise that God will show up for us like God showed up for Mary, the other disciples, and finally Thomas.

I have met a few people who credit a single significant event with cementing their faith, such that they never doubted again. That's one way God forms faith in people. But for many others, myself included, doubt is part of the process. Even canonized saints and mystics talk about spiritually dry seasons in their lives. So if we struggle at times to say *I see the Lord*, we're not alone. Imagine that whole week when Thomas would have heard virtually every other person he knew talk about seeing the Lord when it must have seemed to him as if Jesus picked the one time when only he was absent to show up. Yet in the end, Jesus returned for Thomas, too.

If you've been having a Thomas kind of time lately, maybe you want to stop listening here. The promise that Jesus will get to us, even if we can't perceive him right now, might be enough. But if you need to know how this gospel not only comforts but challenges us, may I suggest this: If God came to awaken faith in Thomas, and God comes to awaken faith in us, then we can trust God to keep awakening faith in others. It can be frustrating—or heartbreaking—when it seems like someone we love is living without the joy of the Lord that we have come to know, whether we make that assumption because they don't attend worship, or they don't belong to a church, or they have left for another denomination or another religion or no religion, or they live according to a different interpretation of what is holy. It can be tempting to just yell louder, *I have seen the Lord*, with the subtext being *my experience should be enough to convince you to believe*. But remember that's not how it worked for Thomas. Thomas didn't believe what he heard other people say; he needed to see for himself. Maybe our energy is best spent not by *telling* others that we have seen the Lord but by *showing* others the risen Christ who dwells in us through lives transformed, through love, grace, and generosity. How else can we expect people to see the love of the Lord? So may God who faithfully shows up for us be conspicuous to you such that your new life in Christ may be unmistakable to others.