

Thomas, the Hesitant Believer

Devotional Reading: Psalm 91:1–6

Background Scripture: John 11:14–16; 14:5–8; 20:24–29; 21:1–2

John 11:14–16

¹⁴ So then he told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead, ¹⁵ and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.”

¹⁶ Then Thomas (also known as Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

John 14:5–8

⁵ Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

⁶ Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.”

⁸ Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.”

John 20:24–29

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.”

John 21:1–2

¹ Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It happened this way: ² Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together.

Key Text

Then [Jesus] said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” —John 20:27

The Testimony of Faithful Witnesses

Unit 3: Faithful Witnesses Spread the Good News

Lessons 9–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify Thomas's development as an observer of Jesus' life and ministry.
2. Explain why the Gospel of John might emphasize Thomas's refusal to believe without seeing Jesus for himself.
3. Make a plan to share their doubts with fellow believers who can provide encouragement in faith.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. From Doubt to Faith
- B. Lesson Context

I. Physical Death (John 11:14–16)

- A. Bound to See Lazarus (vv. 14–15)
- B. Bold Suggestion (v. 16)

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- A. Confused Questioner (v. 5)
Confident Navigation
- B. Way to the Father (vv. 6–7)
- C. Imprudent Request (v. 8)

III. Resurrection Appearances (John 20:24–29)

- A. Thomas's Stipulation (vv. 24–25)
- B. Visit and Invitation (vv. 26–27)
Wide-Eyed Wonder and Evidence
- C. Belief and Response (vv. 28–29)

IV. At the Sea of Galilee (John 21:1–2)

- A. Important Appearance (v. 1)
- B. Important Audience (v. 2)

Conclusion

- A. Faith Beyond Doubt
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. From Doubt to Faith

"I am an atheist," he said. His wife and children attended our church, but this was his first Sunday. He made it clear he was only there to support his family—he didn't believe in God.

Several months passed, and he reached out again, asking for a meeting. He asked profound and sincere questions about the evidence for Jesus Christ's bodily resurrection. Something was stirring within him. Our discussion was open, honest, and thoughtful. A few weeks later, he chose Jesus as his personal Savior and was baptized.

Skepticism, doubt, and questions characterize some journeys toward faith. Today's lesson highlights one disciple's willingness to ask questions and seek evidence toward sincere belief.

B. Lesson Context

Tradition has labeled Thomas as a pessimist and skeptic. The Gospel of John refers to Thomas as "Didymus" three times (John 11:16; 20:24; 21:2). All these texts are under consideration in today's lesson. Scholars have commented on this designation, which literally means "twin," as meaning "double," like "double-minded." This interpretation has led to the conceptualization of Thomas as a doubter.

The reputation is not entirely fair, however, as it presupposes that Thomas's questions and requests for evidence were extreme or his disbelief was unwarranted. The disciples had no idea that Jesus would return to life. Thomas's desire for proof did not make him a "typical skeptic" because he alone, among the other disciples, had yet to see Jesus.

I. Physical Death

(John 11:14–16)

The setting for our first segment of text is in the vicinity of the village of "Bethany on the other side of the Jordan" (John 1:28; 10:40). This village is not to be confused with the Bethany that is about two miles east of Jerusalem in Judea. The latter was a frequent stop for Jesus and his disciples (Matthew 26:6; Mark 11:1; 14:3; Luke 19:29; 24:50;

John 11:1; 12:1–8). For today’s text, however, Jesus heads to the other Bethany, the one on the east side of the Jordan River. This village is where Jesus fled after attempts on his life during the feast of dedication in Jerusalem (10:22, 31–39).

While teaching in or near Bethany beyond the Jordan and establishing many believers (John 10:41–42), Jesus receives word that a friend named Lazarus is ill (11:1–3). Lazarus and his two sisters, Mary and Martha, live in the Bethany near Jerusalem. They have a close relationship with Jesus, hosting him in their home and learning from him (Luke 10:38–42). John tells us that Jesus “loved” them (John 11:5).

When Lazarus falls ill, his sisters immediately send word to Jesus (John 11:3). Over the objections of his disciples, Jesus intends to go back to visit them (11:7–9). But he intentionally delays his journey by two days (11:6). During this delay, Lazarus’s illness progresses and ultimately leads to his death. Jesus discerns Lazarus’s passing and informs his disciples it is time to take a trip to visit their friends (11:7, 11). He uses a figure of speech to describe Lazarus’s fate: “our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep” (11:11). But the disciples misinterpret this to mean natural sleep (11:12–13). Jesus now corrects the misunderstanding (compare Acts 7:60; 1 Corinthians 11:30; 15:6, 18, 20).

Jesus has divine knowledge of the situation. He demonstrates his omniscience (complete and infinite awareness), which emphasizes his deity. Jesus’ deity is a central theme of John’s Gospel (compare John 1:47–48; 2:24–25; 4:16–19, 29).

What Do You Think?

What is the definition of “figurative language”?

Digging Deeper

How does the use of figurative language enhance the messages of Matthew 5:13–16; 7:3–5; 10:16; John 10:7–10; and 15:1–4?

15. “And for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.”

Jesus begins an explanation for why he has not departed for Bethany sooner. That explanation focuses on the need for the disciples to *believe*. Jesus understands that Lazarus’s death will serve a divine purpose. Even to this point in the Gospel accounts, lack of belief lingers among Jesus’ followers. This problem must be—and will be—addressed. By waiting until Lazarus has died, Jesus positions himself to do so.

Jesus transitions away from the disciples’ concerns and move the conversation forward. He invites his disciples to accompany him back to Bethany.

What Do You Think?

How does the setting of a story impact your understanding of the narrative?

Digging Deeper

What tools can you use to increase your awareness of setting (or context) as you study Scripture?

What Do You Think?

Have you ever been “glad” something difficult happened for the sake of someone’s learning or development?

Digging Deeper

In what ways might you allow the Holy Spirit to readjust your perspective on life’s disappointments, difficulties, and challenges?

A. Bound to See Lazarus (vv. 14–15)

14. So then he told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead,

Throughout Jesus’ earthly ministry, his disciples have trouble with his use of figurative language (examples: Matthew 13:34; Mark 8:14–21; compare John 16:25–30). In response to the disciples’ misunderstanding, Jesus now speaks without figurative language: their friend *Lazarus is dead*.

B. Bold Suggestion (v. 16)

16. Then Thomas (also known as Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

Typically, Peter is the outspoken disciple (Matthew 16:15–16; Luke 12:41; John 6:68–69; 13:6), but this time it is *Thomas* who speaks up. The verse gives him a second name: *Didymus*, which means “twin” (see Lesson Context). There are four listings of the original 12 apostles in the New Testament (Matthew 10:2–4; Mark 3:16–19; Luke 6:13–16; Acts 1:13). The placing of Thomas in the ordering of the four listings is seventh, eighth, eighth, and sixth, respectively.

The disciples are hesitant to make the trip because the Jews in Judea had already tried to stone Jesus (John 10:31–33; 11:8). Seeing that Jesus is determined to return despite the danger, Thomas makes the bold statement we see here—not to Jesus but to Thomas’s fellow *disciples*. Perhaps this emboldens Peter to declare similarly in Matthew 26:33.

II. Heavenly Realities

(John 14:5–8)

We jump to the next time Thomas is featured by name. Jesus is in his final week. On his last observance of the Passover, Jesus washes his disciples’ feet (John 13:1–17). He also predicts his betrayal (13:18–30) and Peter’s denial (13:31–38). The disciples become distressed and confused (13:22), so Jesus begins to teach again, comforting them (14:1). Jesus says that he is going “to prepare a place” for them (14:2). His words regarding both a destination and a way to get there prompt a question from Thomas (14:4).

A. Confused Questioner (v. 5)

5. Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

The question from *Thomas* asks about both the destination (*where are you going*) and the way to get there (*so how can we know?*). Thomas is likely thinking of specific, earthly directions—something concrete, like an address. His response reveals desire: Thomas wants to go where Jesus is going, but he doesn’t feel like he has enough information. Jesus speaks of a spiritual and heavenly reality, while Thomas contemplates a physical location.

We don’t know the tone behind Thomas’s reaction, but we know it is honest. Thomas is open with Jesus—he admits, “I don’t get it!”—and that opens the door to Jesus’ utterance of one of the most well-known passages of Scripture ever spoken, written, and quoted (next verse).

This interaction is not the first time the disciples show their lack of understanding or ask for further clarification, and it won’t be the last. They ask Jesus to explain after he tells the parable of the sower (Mark 4:10–13). Another time, they mistake his reference to the leaven of the Pharisees as literal bread (Matthew 16:5–12). Even after his resurrection, the disciples struggle to comprehend. Jesus has to teach them extensively and open their eyes before they recognize him and can decipher the Scriptures (Luke 24:25–32).

Even Jesus’ parents had a hard time comprehending who he is and what he was doing. Recall the story of twelve-year-old Jesus left behind in Jerusalem. After recovering him in the temple courts, his parents voice their anxiety, and Jesus is incredulous. He asks them, “Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:49), but they frankly do not understand (2:50).

Confident Navigation

When I was about ten years old, my mom drove me to my grandmother’s house for a visit. On the way, I noticed how many turns and stops we had to make to get there. The trip was about 45 minutes long, and to my little mind, it seemed impossible to remember all the directions. How did my mom do it?

Overwhelmed, I suddenly burst into tears. When my mom asked me what was wrong, I said I never wanted to get my driver’s license. I confessed that I was afraid I’d never be able to go anywhere without getting hopelessly lost. My mom reassured me that my orientation would come with time and practice, and I am happy to report that I eventually got my license!

Thomas reminds me of ten-year-old me. He asks Jesus how they could possibly know where he was going. Perhaps Thomas felt overwhelmed at the magnitude of it all. Riding along in the car as a passenger is one thing. Taking control as

the driver is quite another! How do you handle spiritual navigation and ensure you're following Jesus? —N. M. H.

B. Way to the Father (vv. 6–7)
6a. Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life.

Regarding Thomas’s query about life’s destination and how to get there, Jesus begins with the latter: Jesus himself is *the way*. This is one of seven statements in the Gospel of John that begin “I am the . . .” as self-identifiers for Jesus (the other six are John 6:35; 8:12; 10:7, 11; 11:25; 15:1). Each unveils a unique facet of Jesus’ identity as they firmly declare his divinity. The particular “I am the” statement now before us reveals Jesus himself as the guide and pathway. He is the road that leads to an eternal life that is reconciled with God (compare Romans 5:10–11; 2 Corinthians 5:18–19; Colossians 1:19–22; Ephesians 2:13–16).

6b. “No one comes to the Father except through me.

Now Jesus switches from discussing how to get to the destination to specifying it. The destination is nothing less than admittance into the presence of the heavenly *Father*. Before Thomas’s query, Jesus spoke of the nature of that presence in terms of the “Father’s house” (John 14:2–3). Jesus promises that he will be there with his disciples (14:4).

Jesus is one with the Father, sees him clearly, and descended from heaven to earth according to his will (John 1:18; 3:13; 10:30). To properly approach the Father is to come by way of Jesus.

What Do You Think?

What does Jesus mean when he calls himself “the way”? How is he “the life”? “the truth”?

Digging Deeper

How do the seven “I am the . . .” statements of Christ enhance your understanding of Jesus and his role (John 6:35; 8:12; 10:7, 11; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1)?

7. “If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.”

There is a unity between the Father and Son that is difficult to put into words. But when a believer knows one, that believer knows something of the other. In fact, knowledge of the Father is conditional on knowing Jesus. This is a challenge to the disciples: Do they really know the Son? The answer to that question comes next.

What Do You Think?

What caused the disciples to miss seeing the Father in Jesus?

Digging Deeper

How does Matthew 25:35–40 deepen your conceptualization of “seeing” God?

C. Imprudent Request (v. 8)
8. Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.”

This reaction reveals that the disciples continue to struggle to understand Jesus’ teaching. *Philip* voices their lack of understanding this time by asking Jesus to *show* them the *Father*. His request reveals a continuing misunderstanding regarding the connection between Jesus and the Father.

III. Resurrection Appearances
(John 20:24–29)

Jesus appeared personally and in the flesh to several people on the day of his resurrection (Matthew 28:1–10; John 20:1–23; etc.). Even so, doubts lingered and would continue to linger over the weeks ahead (Matthew 28:17; Luke 24:38). The most articulate of these comes from the apostle Thomas.

A. Thomas’s Stipulation (vv. 24–25)
24–25a. Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!”

The phrase *when Jesus came* refers to his appearance in John 20:19–23. It’s easy to imagine that the declaration *We have seen the Lord!* is the very first thing spoken to Thomas when he rejoins the group.

25b. But he said to them, “Unless I see the

GOD CAN HANDLE OUR DOUBTS.



Visual for Lesson 9. *Point to the visual and ask, "What doubts or questions of faith do you have? How might other believers encourage you?"*

nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

This is where the derogatory phrase "doubting Thomas" originates. Eyewitness accounts of his fellow disciples are not good enough for Thomas. He declares his need for physical, tangible evidence (compare John 4:48). Belief in disembodied spirits was common in the ancient world, and Thomas wants firsthand proof that the claim of Jesus' resurrection is more than a ghost story. Only then will Thomas believe that the person the disciples saw is the same Jesus who was crucified, died, was buried, and has risen.

B. Visit and Invitation (vv. 26–27)

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!"

Waiting a *week*, Jesus is in no hurry to prove himself to *Thomas*. We can only imagine the discussions and arguments between Thomas and the other *disciples* during that interim! When the right time does come, the circumstances are almost identical to those of the previous appearance of Jesus (compare John 20:19).

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."

Jesus, who is very well aware of Thomas's doubt, addresses him directly with the invitation we see here. Worthy of note is the fact that Jesus' invitation exactly mirrors Thomas's stated demand to personally examine Jesus' *hands* and *side* (John 20:25b, above; compare 19:34).

Wide-Eyed Wonder and Evidence

I once heard a child psychologist say that when young children ask *why*, they aren't always looking for a direct answer. Sometimes, they are simply trying to express their wide-eyed wonder. A child might ask, "Why does the moon shine so brightly?" But they may be trying to express something more like, "Wow! What a miraculous thing the moon is! Look how it lights up the night sky!"

A scientific response can diminish the wonder and awe of the moment. A better response might be something like, "I know! Isn't it amazing?"

Thomas often gets a bad rap for disbelieving eyewitness testimony from reliable sources that Jesus rose from the dead. But perhaps he was also expressing wide-eyed wonder and amazement at the miracle. Imagine trying to wrap your mind around the news of someone coming back to life! Here's a good evangelistic tool to use sometime: ask an unbeliever, "What kind of evidence would you need to believe Jesus arose from the dead?" —N. M. H.

C. Belief and Response (vv. 28–29)

28. Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

John does not specify whether Thomas reaches out and touches Jesus' physical body. Instead, the text suggests that Thomas believes without touching Jesus' side. He responds to Jesus with a personal confession of faith in his *Lord* and *God*.

Thomas thus pulls together everything Jesus taught about himself in this complete recognition: Jesus embodies the very essence of God the Father, in whom the fullness of the Godhead dwells (John 10:30; Colossians 1:15–19; 2:9; Hebrews 1:3).

29. Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Bible scholars are divided on whether Jesus' response is a reprimand. On the one hand, those

who view it as a rebuke argue that Thomas should have believed on the basis of the eyewitness testimony of the other disciples. On the other hand, the other disciples themselves did not believe until they encountered the risen Christ and saw him personally (Mark 16:9–11; Luke 24:10–11).

The critical point is that Jesus speaks a message for an audience beyond Thomas—the message reaches toward future generations, toward us today. There is blessing in believing without having firsthand knowledge (compare John 20:31).

IV. At the Sea of Galilee

(John 21:1–2)

In the intervening verses of John 20:30–31, the Gospel writer stresses two things. First, the examples he records are but a sample of “many other signs” that the disciples witnessed from Jesus. Second, the instances John chose are written so that the reader will believe in Jesus. These two verses also serve as a transition into the episode that follows.

A. Important Appearance (v. 1)

1. Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It happened this way:

Here we catch one more glimpse of the risen Christ with his *disciples*. They convene at the *Sea of Galilee*, which is also referred to by others names like the Sea of Tiberias (John 6:1; compare Luke 5:1). Jesus’ appearance here is in line with Matthew 26:32; 28:7; Mark 14:28; 16:7.

B. Important Audience (v. 2)

2. Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together.

Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances number about a dozen, depending on how textual overlaps are counted. Collective witness increases the credibility of the testimony (compare 1 Corinthians 15:6). In this particular appearance, John notes the presence of seven disciples, with Thomas named second (compare the four listings of the

apostles noted on John 11:16, above). Thomas is poised to observe another miracle (John 21:6) and Peter’s restoration (21:15–19).

Conclusion

A. Faith Beyond Doubt

Thomas’s doubt mirrors a common human experience: the struggle of faith, which asks us to trust evidence that we ourselves cannot see firsthand. Jesus often taught in parables, his words falling on his hearers’ ears like riddles. And his resurrection is a fantastic miracle! Thomas’s interactions with Jesus show humans’ difficulty with stepping outside the physical world and into a more important spiritual reality. The way toward deep comprehension of Jesus as the Son of God, Messiah, and Lord is challenging. Understanding Jesus as fully God, one with the Father, is difficult too. It takes questioning and wrestling to overcome the doubts and puzzles that inevitably emerge along the journey of faith. We must have the eyes of our understanding enlightened to truly comprehend (Ephesians 1:18). Sometimes that requires honest questions. It always requires engagement with Jesus, with whom the text of Scripture is primarily concerned.

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, open our eyes to see how we are like Thomas in both our strengths and weaknesses. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Jesus meets us in our doubts.

How to Say It

Bethabara	<i>Beth-ab-uh-ruh.</i>
Bethany	<i>Beth-uh-nee.</i>
Cana	<i>Kay-nuh.</i>
Didymus	<i>Did-uh-mus.</i>
Galilee	<i>Gal-uh-lee.</i>
omniscience	<i>ahm-nish-uns.</i>
Pharisees	<i>Fair-ih-seez.</i>
Tiberias	<i>Tle-beer-ee-us.</i>
Zebedee	<i>Zeb-eh-dee.</i>