

Sermon for Sunday, April 12 2026

John 20:19-31

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

My husband Mark is a retired electrical engineer. He gave me permission to share this insight/wisdom that he gained while he worked as an engineer. He told me several times over the years that engineers need to investigate and understand even the smallest of details of a design or product, the little things that might look insignificant on paper. Why? Because if you don't some overlooked detail will almost certainly come back to cause major disruptions. Imagine sitting in a conference room on a sales call and the prospective buyer points out a technical challenge or asks a question that you can't answer. The potential sale might end right at that moment. Or the company buys the product and it doesn't work as expected....these are the challenges that keep engineers awake at night. Understanding the details was really important.

Jesus' disciple Thomas has, for many long years, had the adjective "doubting" attached to his name. When I read the story of Thomas, I don't hear a man who doubts. I envision a man who needs to understand the details, because if he doesn't he won't be able to honestly look at other people with integrity and say, "I saw Jesus alive after his resurrection. I saw the wound in his side. I saw the holes in his hands and feet from the nails. I spoke with him. And I know, without question, that he is alive!" Thomas isn't a doubter; Thomas is a man cut from the same cloth as the many engineers that exist in this world. People who need to understand the details.

There is an interesting contrast between Thomas and the other disciples. Earlier in John's gospel Thomas is quoted. This quote occurs when Jesus tells the disciples that he is going to go to Mary & Martha's home to heal their brother. Thomas responds, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." (John 11:16) Thomas knows that being a follower of Jesus is risky—especially at that time just a few days before Passover. They are moving closer to Jerusalem, a dangerous decision, and Thomas knows it. Thomas is a realist.

Thomas might also be described as a brave person because on the day of Jesus' resurrection he is not with the other disciples. We are told that the disciples were in a house and that the doors are

locked. (Remember that this is still the first day of the week: the day when Mary sees the risen Lord Jesus.) Where is Thomas? We aren't told. It seems that Thomas is out and about in the city. He might be hiding in some other place in the city. Or he might be out gathering groceries, or revisiting the garden, or sitting at the Temple praying or.... When he does rejoin the disciples (and we are not told when they tell him that they have seen the Lord; it could have been that evening or the next day or whenever.) That's when he demands proof.

Now you might think to yourself, "See pastor, Thomas doubts!" You could also say that Thomas simply wants what all the other disciples received—an actual encounter with the risen Lord. He wants to see Jesus so that he can honestly go out and tell other people that Jesus is alive. Thomas, needing to understand the details, asks for a direct encounter with the risen Lord.

Let's turn to the other disciples now and think about their reaction to one of their own—about their reaction to Thomas. Yes, when they see him they tell him that they have "seen the Lord." But they also tolerate his doubt and his questions. They don't kick him out of the group. They patiently wait, and perhaps hope and pray, that Thomas will have his heart's desire: to see the risen Lord for himself.

Thanks be to God, Jesus **does** give him his heart's desire. Jesus **does** appear to him. Jesus **does** make himself known and uses this situation as a teaching moment, not for Thomas but for us. After all, we are here in this sanctuary as followers of Jesus. I have never seen the risen Lord. I dare say, that the same is true for you. (I'm not referring to dramatic conversion moments—I'm talking about seeing Jesus.) And Jesus, knowing that there would be millions of followers over the years who would not see him in person, people like us; gives us a blessing. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." That's us folks....we are blessed ones.

Thomas gets to say what we all want to say, the truth of what we do not want to admit, how difficult it is to believe in Jesus whom we have never encountered for ourselves. This Gospel realizes this problem and has included an [exemplary] story that acknowledges this challenge.¹ No, we have never seen Jesus but we believe anyway.

There are, my friends, at least two other important lessons for us from this story. First, it reminds us that not everyone is at the

same place in their faith. Additionally, not everyone believes exactly the same things about Jesus. I am far from an expert on early church history, but I can assure you that there were many, many different beliefs about Jesus almost from the very beginning and especially after he ascended to heaven. These different beliefs continue even to this day as evidenced by the thousands of denominations of Christian churches that exist at this moment. But just as those first disciples did not criticize Thomas or his questions we must be careful to do the same. We must recognize that other followers of Jesus belonging to different traditions have a valid faith in Jesus as God's Son. Recognizing this difference, acknowledging their beliefs as true and honest can be really hard. I confess before you that I am guilty of these types of harsh judgments.

A second important lesson comes from the fact that we live in a time of enormous political division. We must remind ourselves to trust that God is at work in the world. God is striving to set the world aright. Just as the first disciples listened to Thomas and his scoffing over their report of Jesus' resurrection, we must take the time to listen to others. We don't have to agree with them. We don't have to convince them of an alternate way of thinking. We have to remember what God tells us in Isaiah 55, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:8-9) God's ways are generally beyond our imagination. We have to let God's Spirit do the work and trust that God will accomplish what God needs to have accomplished.

Allow me to be clear: there are most certainly times when we will have to use our voices and our bodies to stop great harm from

occurring to other people. But that's a different situation from the belief or lack of belief that Thomas is expressing. In today's Scripture reading we have no evidence that Thomas does not physically, mentally, spiritually, or emotionally harm any other person as he expressed his doubt. That's important. Expressing one's truth as Thomas did is not a sin. And importantly, Jesus stepped up and provided Thomas with what he needed. Our job, especially when someone expresses their doubt, is to start with listening. Then, as the Holy Spirit gives us the words, we can gently and honestly express our beliefs. We can plant the seeds, or water the soil, or add a little fertilizer, and in doing so, support the person with doubts to come to the place of surety. We can help them to understand the details. *(Pause)*

Some scholars think that in its original composition verses 30 and 31 were the end of John's gospel. They certainly seem to act as the concluding thoughts of the author.

I conclude today's sermon with verse 31 from today's lesson, "But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." Believing in Jesus, and believing that he is the Son of God is the key to the gospel of John. All that has been written in this gospel, was written to provide support for the premise that Jesus is the one sent by God to bring salvation to the world. As Jesus said back in John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that God gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

ⁱ John, Lewis, Karoline, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2014, pg 248.