

# Doubting Thomas Grieves

Second Sunday after Easter

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From the front pew of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL

**John 20:19-31**

Matt Matthews

We all have stories of grief. We've all been there. We've lost. We've hurt. We've asked God, "How long?" Pain is something that has touched all of us at some point to some degree. We've all lost. We've all hurt. We've all grieved.

When I read the story of Thomas in John's gospel, I see something that I don't always noticed before. Yes, I see, again, that Thomas is not going to believe unless he sees with his own eyes. Yes, I see that Thomas is probably of the analytical type; he needs to touch, to examine, to assess. "Blind faith" are words that do not describe Thomas.

I think this is what John wants us to see in Thomas' exchange with Jesus. John wants us to see "doubting" Thomas' doubt. John wants us to see how Thomas needs proof. I think John also wants us to see how Jesus meets Thomas where he is. No judgement. Just a willingness to be known. *Touch the holes. Feel my side. I'm here, Thomas. I'm real. And I'm alive. Bring your questions. Bring your doubt.*

If there is a main point in this text, Jesus sums it up when he addresses Thomas: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

This is the familiar landscape of the story of Doubting Thomas.

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What's less familiar about this text is the possibility of Thomas' grief.

We see that Thomas doubts. But we forget how heavy the events of the previous week were. The loss of a loved one, especially, has a way of knocking us out. Grief has a way of making us feel alone and isolated and numb.

The poet Mark Doty writes of losing his loved one, "How could I ever prepare for an absence the size of you?"

Before Thomas ever doubts, he grieves. His heart is broken. Like the other disciples, he's probably in emotional shock. He's staggering around numb, detached, floating aimlessly through an emotional fog. Emotional shock caused by grief creates feelings of (let me drop some big words on you:) derealization, depersonalization, dissociative amnesia.

Is it fair to say that Thomas is stuck inside his grief? If so, how can we expect him to have hope in resurrection? It was H. Richard Niebuhr who first referred to grief as emotional "shipwreck." We want Thomas to think logically? We want Thomas to believe this rumor that Jesus is risen? We want Thomas to give into the hope of victory after everything has already been lost? We are the crazy ones. Thomas is right where he ought to be: hurting, confused, suffering. We should cut him some slack.

Linda Hunt in her book *Pilgrimage Through Loss* writes that when one is in the midst of grief, one

needs to *do the next thing*. That may be simply getting out of bed. Or pouring cereal. Buying groceries. Eventually, you go back to work, the joy in life gets bigger over time, things may begin to feel normal again, and after time you'll feel alive again. But at the beginning, *doing the next thing*, involves very, very small steps.

Grief "disturbs sleep, infects dreams, and saps energy . . . It's like a low-grade fever with a long fading trust in life itself." Grief causes us to lose heart. In John's gospel, is it possible that we find a bewildered Thomas who has lost his heart? He's right where he ought to be emotionally, taking very, very small steps. It's impossible what the disciples ask him to consider. Resurrection? Jesus alive? *Get real*.

*"How could I ever prepare for an absence the size of you?"*

The disciples are expecting a lot out of poor Thomas.

In some traditions black is worn by the family of the deceased. There is an official time of mourning that may last years. Linda Hunt says that our Western culture has little tolerance for grieving slowly. Rushed grieving, in fact, sets us back. Rushed grieving is like a punch to the gut.

Maybe that's how Thomas feels. *Hurry up. You've grieved enough. Get over it. It's time to move on.* Thomas doesn't need these frantic disciples talking about resurrection. Instead, Thomas needs to sit with a good listener.

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I've always liked Thomas. And I'm grateful for Thomas. He's bold enough to share his doubts. He's bold enough NOT to go along with the crowd. Thomas is curious. He needs to see it with his own eyes. He questions authority. Nothing is wrong with that.

Thomas as a figure of grief makes me like him even more.

And I'm grateful that Jesus met Thomas where he was, that Jesus allowed Thomas to have his doubts, that Jesus understood Thomas' grief. Jesus knew Thomas needed time to get his head around what a broken heart would not allow him yet to believe.

But we *are* Easter people. Wounds do, indeed, heal. And hearts do mend. Our journey through grief gets us to the other side, step by little step. God's grace reigns, helps, guides, restores, heals.

Nobody knew that better than Thomas.

The Lord is risen/The Lord is risen indeed.

John 20:19-31 (NRSV)

19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin[a]), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." 28 Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" 29 Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31 But these are written so that you may come to believe[b] that Jesus is the Messiah,[c] the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.