

The Vindication of Thomas

What do we know about the Apostle who is so erroneously called Doubting Thomas? The Scriptural evidence regarding Thomas' faith in Jesus was unyielding, and strong even unto death. How specially blessed we would be if our faith could be as strong and as continually manifested as was his. Having stated this, let's now examine that Scripture tells us about him which is that Thomas neither doubted the resurrection of Jesus nor lost his absolute faith and trust in Him. The first mention of Thomas in the context of this study is found in John 11:16 where it is written, "*Then said Thomas, which is called Didymus unto his fellow disciples, Let us also go, that we may die with him.*" The occasion which prompted these words from Thomas, was the notification of the death of Lazarus. Jesus then said that He must go to Bethany knowing that the Sanhedrin who were in Jerusalem only 2 miles away, and that they had vowed to find and kill Him. From all of the apostles perspective, going to Bethany was asking to be killed. Jesus didn't urge them to follow Him. It was Thomas who inspired the others to follow Jesus even into death. In reading this, one cannot help but see in his words this powerful declaration of faith in Jesus, even unto death.

Jesus' travel to Bethany was certain to be known by all of his enemies, and so the apostles felt certain that all their lives would be in great danger if they dared to follow Him. They strongly urged Him not to go there. As we can see however, once Thomas realized that Jesus was going anyway, alone if necessary, there was no doubting or hesitation in Thomas. Instead he revealed his true heroic and loyal-unto-death commitment to Jesus that inspired the rest of his followers to go with Him, regardless of their almost certain fate. By the way, "Thomas" means "twin" in Chaldean, and "Didymus" means "double, or twin", in Greek. Therefore it seems evident that he was a "twin" in what ever language one chooses to read about him. This also seems to indicate that he was known as "twin" rather by whatever Hebrew name he had been initially given.

The next that we read about Thomas is in John 14:5. The scene is in the upper room, where Jesus is telling them about things that will soon happen, and how He is going to prepare a place for them where they will join Him later. In verse 4, Jesus says *“and wither I go ye know, and the way ye know.”* To this Thomas responded, *“Lord we know not whither thou goest, and how can we know the way?”* Thomas question is a logical one. It is not in any way expressing doubt or disagreement with Jesus. It is a simple desire for a clear understanding of what Jesus meant. It expresses a serious concern, and firm intent to follow Jesus to wherever He was going. In this case, it was a spiritual journey to go to heaven where Jesus would prepare a place for them (verse 3). Notice here again that Thomas took the lead as a faithful, dedicated Apostle when he asked the question that must have been in each of their minds.

Thomas was honest and comfortable in admitting his ignorance. He wasn't in any way doubting or contradicting Jesus, but instead, he had a keen desire to continue to be with Jesus and thus was eager to know precisely what he needed to know so that he could follow and maintain his obedience to his Lord. At this point the Apostles had not yet realized the spiritual nature of what Jesus was telling them. Thomas took on the role of their spokesman by asking that question. Given the scripturally based testimony as one who has so compellingly expressing the quality of his character, his loyalty, his faithfulness and his love unto death for Jesus, shouldn't we at least study carefully why he was labeled a doubter?

Let's start by relating the chronological order of Jesus' appearances after His resurrection.

Appearance #1 Jesus first appearance was to Mary Magdalen as we all know.

Appearance #2 According to Matthew 28:9 Jesus next appeared to the women who were returning home from the tomb. This clearly was His second appearance. During this appearance, in the afternoon and evening of that first day, is when all of His appearances took place. It's the sequence of some of these that seem somewhat difficult, yet very important to determine. Jesus' 3rd appearance seems to have occurred when He broke bread, in the house of two

disciples with whom He had walked along the road to the town of Emmaus after the crucifixion.

However, when Cleopas reported to the 11 in Jerusalem, he reported that Jesus had earlier been seen by Peter. One of the 2 with whom He walked to Emmaus was the disciple Cleopas. The other was not named. (Luke 24:18) Apparently their journey ended at their house into which they invited Jesus to have dinner with them. It merely says “abide”, however, given the time of day, it may have been their invitation to supper, or even to stay overnight.

In Luke 24:34, the first thing Cleopas tells the assembled 11 is that Jesus had already appeared to Peter. We have no other evidence of when this meeting occurred. How and when did Cleopas learn of this? It is evident that it was when Jesus was with them in Emmaus before He disappeared. There is no other later appearance to him mentioned until He is among the 11. This then means that Jesus’ appearance to Peter occurred before He appeared to Cleopas, and was therefore the second appearance.

Appearance #3 therefore was to the 2 Apostels. It is the 3rd appearance that is often confused with the 4th by many who examine these matters. Many conclude that #3 the appearance was to Cleopas at Emmaus. However, Cleopas himself refuted that idea. How could they have known about Peter unless Jesus had told them? There is no evidence that He appears to them again to tell them this after the Emmaus trip. From that we must conclude that the Jesus’ 2nd appearance was to Peter, and his 3rd to Cleopas.

Before we move on, as a little side excursion let us see if we can determine the name of the other disciple. Scripture provides the necessary clues. They asked Jesus to “abide with us”. To me this strongly indicates that they were speaking of their home. We tend to conclude they were both men, although no such evidence is given. Might it be

husband and wife? When we research the name Cleopas, we find evidence that indicates that the name Cleophas refers to the same man.

In John 19:25 we read that there was a Mary who was the half-sister of Jesus' mother and that she was the wife of Cleophas. From this, I believe that it's safe to conclude that the two disciples with whom Jesus walked down to Emmaus were Cleophas, and his wife Mary. Thus it was most likely into the Cleophas family home where Jesus was asked to abide. Notice that they still didn't recognize who He was until He broke the bread. There are 2 things to be observed from this. First, as simply an invited guest, Jesus violated an important custom. It was the head of the household's duty and privilege to break the bread. For a visitor to have done this was a severe breach of a sacred custom, as well as good manners.

Jesus knew this, and so it was deliberate. It was His way to express His authority as God. Second, in breaking of the bread Jesus deliberately confirmed His identity by revealing the holes in His hands. Thus they were given undeniable evidence that it was Jesus, and that He had indeed been resurrected. Then He disappeared. Once they realized the truth of the resurrection, the husband and wife rushed back to Jerusalem. There they found the 11, which of course included Peter and Thomas. Note that they had not yet replaced Judas with Bartholomew. Therefore, at that time there were only 11 apostles.

Appearance #4 therefore was to Cleopas and Mary.

Appearance #5 was to the assembled group of 11 back in Jerusalem, as found in Luke 24:33, 34. There, Cleophas spoke to all 11, which therefore included Peter and Thomas. He told them about his Emmaus encounter with the resurrected Jesus. But first, he told them that God had already spoken to Peter (Simon). However, before Peter could speak, if he even had intended to, Jesus appeared among them, preempting all else. Once they were all convinced that Jesus was not a spirit, but a flesh and bone man, He disappeared. It's evident from that appearance all (including Thomas) were convinced of the fact that Jesus did indeed return to physical life, that is that Jesus had been resurrected as He had

earlier predicted. No one seeing Him there as flesh and bones could have failed to believe that it was in fact Jesus. Therefore, if Thomas truly believed in the resurrection, as this exposure to His physical presence clearly provided, what was it that he didn't believe?

Appearance #6 of the resurrected Jesus, appeared only to the 10, because Thomas was not there. (John 20:24). It occurred in the secured room. Later, when Thomas returned to the room, the others told him that Jesus had appeared to them, in His resurrected flesh and bone body, in this secured room, and then again disappeared from the room. This all seemed ridiculous to Thomas. That, he said, he would believe only if he saw this phenomenon himself. Remember, we have already seen, what is clear evidence that Thomas already believed in the resurrection as a result of Jesus' appearance to the 11. So again what was it that he didn't believe? The only thing that he couldn't believe was the idea that Jesus, the resurrected flesh and bone Man/God could have physically entered and left the secured room!

As already pointed out, when Cleopas arrived back in Jerusalem, and met with the 11, which necessarily included Thomas, Jesus appeared among them. Some of the old mindset have a big problem rationalizing the fact away, because they cling to the notion that Thomas doubted the resurrection. They seem to conclude that Thomas was not really close enough to see Jesus, or he simply couldn't believe, what he saw, or from a perspective that such a thing couldn't be, and is simply dismissed as impossible. Others believe that the number 11 should be taken euphemistically instead of literally.

All we need to do to dismiss these faulty conjectures, is to go back to the beginning of the study where Thomas' character and faith are clearly revealed. This man was among the most serious-minded, sincere, and loyal to Jesus, and was fully committed to follow Jesus even unto sure death. He was very practical and needed to understand a thing clearly before he would act. Surely this was not the kind of man who would take lightly the news that Cleopas brought nor of the evidence of the presence of the One he so loved. Most assuredly, when Jesus appeared, he would have been among the first to have

examined Him and done so most carefully. Therefore, to reason that there was any chance that Thomas was not right up front seeing and believing the presence of the resurrected Jesus, is ludicrous.

Appearance #7 occurred 8 days after #6. It occurred in the same secured room when all 11, including Thomas, were there. When Jesus appeared seemingly from nowhere, Thomas realized that Jesus was in the Spirit, and therefore could appear anywhere He chose to, and then manifest as flesh and bones, and again revert to His spiritual Self so as to disappear in like manner. Because such a power had never before been even theorized, how else except for this example could anyone ever know such spiritual power could exist? The final words during this Appearance #7 are spoken by Jesus to Thomas when He says, as recorded in John 20:29, *“Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.”*

This is considered to have been a personal rebuke, but, I don't think so. I believe that it is a statement that would have been just as appropriate for any and all of the other 10 had they missed what he had missed of the Lord's presence in the locked room. Jesus' comment about believing without seeing was to be more universally applicable than specific to Thomas. What he doubted had nothing to do with this verse. It was intended to have a much broader application than this. It was meant for us, and all who seek Him and His truth. Actually seeing the resurrected Jesus was possible for only a few during the forty days that He chose to remain among them. Except for those precious few people, all believers past, present and future, are those who come to the faith without seeing. They come to the faith in the Unseen One through the Holy Scriptures which testifies of Him while both proving its inerrancy, and providing the truth and the way which leads to Him. There were 5 more appearances, to be only briefly mentioned.

Appearance #8 seems to have been on the shore of Galilee, probably several days later due to the 60 mile travel distance. John 21:7 tells us that there were a total 7 apostles fishing. This included John, although he chose not to name himself. After inviting them to share the meal He had prepared, it appears that He only spoke to Peter. There is a

great deal to be said regarding this event. However, it is not relevant to our current purpose.

Appearance #9 was to over 500 people. Many assume that this as having been spread over the remaining 40 days, 1Corinthians 15:6 says that the 500+ saw him “at once”. If His appearance had been over a period of time the “at once” would not be there. We must not ignore this, but must take what was said literally! This was a one-time event. Jesus did not mingle with the people but instead He appeared publically only that one time. However, He did appear several times to His Apostles and Disciples during those 40 days. Next 1Corinthians 15:7 tells us that “after that” He was seen by James. This clinches the one public appearance interpretation, because if it had meant over the 40 days, there wouldn’t have been any “after that”. Jesus ascended on the 40th day! Thus we see that James received a special meeting with Jesus.

Appearance #10 was to James. James had witnessed Jesus’s other appearances so he must have already known that this was the resurrected Jesus. Therefore, this meeting was to discuss and assign James to his specific ministry, which, of course, resulted in the Book of James, and his outstanding leadership of the early church.

Again, during these 40 days, He did appear to the apostles numerous times. Acts 1:3 says *“To whom also He showed Himself alive after His passion for many infallible proofs, being seen of them forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.”* As evidenced above this showing was only to the Apostles and Disciples, not the public.

Appearance #11 is not often recognized as such, probably because of where it is located in Scripture. We find Jesus administering and also directing the apostles to their assigned commissions as they sat on a mountain in Galilee. They are differently worded, but seem to convey the same basic message. They are found in Matthew 28:16-20 and in Mark 16:15-18.

Appearance #12 is the last and final appearance. It occurred at the time of His ascension. (Luke 24:44-53) and Acts 1:3-9)

Apparently, Jesus appeared to Peter sometime during that first day after He had appeared to the women. We should remember that Peter was the leader of the Apostles, and that he was the one who first realized that the pre-crucifixion Jesus was indeed the Christ. (Matthew 16:16) also, he was the only one recorded to have denied Jesus, and did so in a most blasphemous manner (Mark 14:68-72) It is likely that Jesus' private conversation was to restore their fractured relationship and return Peter to his former leadership position over the apostles. We find that a profound change occurred in Peter, first noticeable mostly in his conduct and in his epistles. He was no longer the ready, fire, aim bumbling dimwitted follower of Jesus. His apostolic services after Jesus ascension to heaven was marked with wisdom, fruitfulness and spiritual power. His writings were well-written, articulate and clearly guided by the indwelling Holy Spirit. This meeting may have been how Jesus chose to set the stage for this mighty "make over" of Peter.