



**"Examined Faith"**

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Hayward, California***

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John 20:19–31 (NRSV)***

Many members of Eden Church and the wider United Church of Christ were raised in the Roman Catholic tradition. In high-church traditions like the Catholic Church, parishioners typically make individual and corporate confessions in the presence of their priest as part of normal worship practices. The informal term for this ritual in the Catholic tradition is "Confession." Today the official term for this ritual in the Roman church is the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The role of confession or reconciliation is not as prominent in low-church Protestant traditions like our own, but it is part of our liturgy.

We include words of confession in our unison and congregational prayers, but don't always include formal prayers of confessions in our weekly liturgy, or offer members scheduled times to make private confessions in the presence of the pastor.

Despite the absence of these formal confessional practices, I hear plenty of confessions from members and friends. The most common among these begins something like this: "Well, you know, I'm not a very good Christian." Or, "You'll have to forgive me, because my faith isn't very strong."

When pressed to explain what is meant by these remarks, confessors often describe themselves as having more faith questions than answers, and being more like doubting Thomas than the women who went running from the tomb shouting, "Christ is risen!"

Whatever the content of the stories I hear, the message is similar. The teller is trying to explain that he or she is not a "good" Christian or "a true believer." Perhaps you can relate? Perhaps you too are a "doubting Thomas."

II

There are several ways that Thomas has been characterized in the Bible and by biblical scholars and biblical readers. The most common view of Thomas in popular culture is that of the flawed apostle.

## Thomas, the Flawed Apostle

This prevailing view of Thomas is based on a narrow, literal reading of John that isolates chapter 20 from the rest of John's gospel and from the other three gospels (which are called the Synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke). This narrow reading also likely filters the interpretation of Thomas through the readers' own self-doubts and fears of inadequacy, so that readers and hearers lock on to sentences that reinforce a sense of inadequacy and reinforce the idea that Thomas—and they and all doubters—are “failed believers.”

Those who hold this view of Thomas as the flawed apostle filter their interpretation of him through the sentence, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (20:29b). Thus they (and perhaps we) see Thomas as a man of weak faith, and perhaps they (and we) see anyone who desires physical proof of the resurrection as a flawed Christian.

While it's easy to understand how eyes and hearts gravitate toward this negative view of Thomas, several leading New Testament scholars (e.g., Raymond Brown, Eugene Boring, and Fred Craddock)<sup>1</sup> argue that John had a larger purpose in mind when he put these blessing words on the lips of Jesus. Specifically, these scholars argue that the text is *not* a criticism of Thomas, but instead a word of encouragement to the generation who could never hope to have physical proof of the resurrection, because they lived fifty or more years after Jesus' death.

Do you hear how differently the blessing from Jesus' lips seems when we understand that it is aimed at the *entire* Johannine community, rather than specifically at Thomas, and when we understand that it was conveyed to an audience who lived a generation or two after Jesus?

“Blessed are you who have not seen and yet have come to believe,” Jesus says.

Do you hear how John is saying through Jesus' words essentially this: “Bless your hearts” you people of faith. Bless your hearts for believing without seeing.

Do you hear how John is encouraging a fledgling Christian community, rather than wagging his finger (or his tongue) at a doubting apostle?

To embrace this nuanced understanding of Thomas, we must let go of literalist interpretations of the gospel that would falsely claim John as an historical account of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection—which it is not.

And, we must instead embrace an historical-critical understanding of John's gospel that sees John as a written testimony *about the meaning of Jesus' life, death, and*

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<sup>1</sup> c.f. Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (Paulist Press: Mahway, NJ, 1979) and Fred Craddock, *et al.*, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year C* (Trinity Press: Valley Forge, PA, 1994, 236–237).

*resurrection*, which emerged within a community of fledgling Christians who lived at the turn of the second century.

Taken from an historical-critical perspective, Thomas is not a flawed apostle, but an “Everyman” in the Johannine community who struggled to make sense of the ministry and mission of a person whom they had never met.

### **Thomas, the Hero of Skeptics**

Because of the popular, but somewhat inaccurate, view of Thomas as the flawed apostle, Thomas has become—in modern progressive circles—a bit of a hero. To intellectual skeptics he is a quintessential “bad boy of the Bible” with whom some intellectuals take great pleasure identifying.

Progressives love the idea and character of Thomas, who seems to legitimize their/our search for truth. To them (to us), we see Thomas as a protagonist who questions all the answers, who is unwilling to check his brain at the door, and who demands tangible proof of the resurrected Christ. For them (for us), Thomas is our kind of guy. A biblical character with whom we can finally relate!

Seen in this light, progressives imagine Thomas as a prototype of Albert Schweitzer, the early twentieth century Renaissance man, who launched (among other things) “the quest for the historical Jesus,” a precursor of the Jesus Seminar, which is a group of contemporary scholars who strive to unearth the historical facts of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection and who strive to dispel myths and falsehoods that may have been perpetuated about his character over the eons.

### **Thomas, the Exemplary Apostle**

Both characterizations of Thomas—that of the flawed apostle and the hero of skeptics—are interesting and enriching in their own right, but I don’t think that either approach fully grasps how the author of John’s gospel saw Thomas.

My own study of John has led me to believe that John, the evangelist, actually saw Thomas as an exemplary apostle who, according to chapter 11, was the picture of fidelity and courage, and whose faith was later rocked to the core (in chapter 20) by the reality of Christ’s passion—and no doubt the threat of death that the Johannine community itself faced at the hands of the Roman authorities.

This third interpretation of Thomas that I propose, which identifies Thomas as the “exemplary apostle,” reveals to us a complex, three-dimensional man who grappled mightily with his faith, his doubts, and his role as an apostle. Taken in this light, in my view, both Thomas and Jesus become more authentic and believable characters.

When we study Thomas in the larger context of John's gospel, he appears to be less of a passionate skeptic and more the devoted apostle whose faith was forged by controversy, crucifixion, and compassion.

In chapter 11, John suggests that Thomas may have been the most courageous of the disciples, because he was willing to lean into the threats and challenges waged against Jesus by the religious and political authorities, rather than to flee from them. In John 11:16, for example, Thomas says, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

When seen in his larger Johannine context, Thomas appears as the most courageous disciple, whose need for physical proof of the resurrection is less of a character flaw, or some sort of intellectual inquiry, and more of an impassioned need to have his own struggle and suffering acknowledge and vindicated by Jesus.

Thus, Thomas is more than a flawed apostle, and more than an intellectual skeptic. He is, instead, a person of faith who—like us—needed to know that Christ felt his pain, understood his suffering, and ultimately pointed him—and us—beyond this veil of tears. So Thomas said, "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."

"A week later," John says, "[Jesus'] 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.' 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.'"

What happens next is unclear. We don't know if Thomas reached out and touched Jesus' hands and side, or if the sheer profundity of Jesus' verbal affirmation of their mutual wounds resolved Thomas' doubts. All we know for sure is that in John's view, in that moment, the resurrection became real for Thomas, and he believed that the Easter message was true.

### III

As we move through the Easter season, perhaps we can learn from Thomas' example, and trust that our need for faith to make sense does not diminish our worth or our faithfulness in the eyes of God. Perhaps too, we can believe that faith is often strengthened rather than diminished by honest questioning. And perhaps we can trust that we worship an empathetic God, who has known pain and suffering, who understands our pain and suffering, and who appears behind the locked doors of our hearts and homes and offers us healing and peace—not as the world gives, but as Christ gives.

Just exactly what form that healing and peace take will vary depending on the nature of our wounds and our needs. For some that sense of healing and peace may come in the form of an assurance that we are *not* flawed in the eyes of God; but instead, we are accepted and loved beyond our wildest dreams. For others that sense of healing and

peace may come in the form of an affirmation of our seeker orientation toward faith and life. And for still others that sense of healing and peace may come in the form of a spiritual presence—or the physical presence of a spiritual community—that helps us expose our own deep wounds (regardless of the shape or form that they take)—and this presence enables us to ask for God's help and the help of others as we move ahead on our healing journeys.

Whatever our situation may be, the gospel message which speaks across all experiences and all time is that the resurrected Christ comes to all who will receive him, and he offers healing and peace—not as the world gives, but as God gives. Friends, this is the good news of the gospel. Thanks be to God. Amen.