



## Sermon Notes, 11 April 2021

**Term** Summer 2021

**Series** John 20 – 21 (Resurrection Appearances)

**Gatherings: the 11, the 5**

**Title** Thomas

**Preacher** Paul Langham

**Reading** – John 20:19-31

### Introduction

This is one of the 'go to' passages when someone proposes that Jesus did not claim to be divine: he accepts Thomas' acclamation 'My Lord and My God' and encourages all who will follow as disciples across the ages to do likewise. John follows this up in the final verses of this chapter, when he says that his gospel is *written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*

Acts 1:3 tells us that *After his suffering, [Jesus] presented himself to [his disciples] and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.*

Our reading recounts two of those earliest appearances ...

### Thomas

Much has been written about Thomas, and you can tell the weight of opinion about him, in that 'Doubting' has been his constant travelling companion through history. Many of us will be able to relate to him, as we will have our own experiences of doubt.

My pastoral experience tells me that people can fall into two extremes of response to doubt

1. Enthroned them: some come to glorify doubt as though that's all we can have. It isn't, and it's clear from this passage that Jesus wants to move us beyond doubt to faith
2. Bemoan them (sorry, not very good, but it rhymes with enthrone ...): others beat themselves up because of doubt and imagine Jesus turning away from them as a result

But here's a key lesson for us all: the position and activity of Jesus are always more significant than our own. That's true in the workplace, community, family and so on ... but especially so when it comes to our relationship with him. However far we have drifted – or fled – from him, his position is always to draw close to us. Whatever we have done – or failed to do – and however we imagine that leaves us, what he has done and what he can do is always greater.

Note two things:

- Jesus understands what Thomas needs. Jesus knows the innermost secrets and thoughts of our hearts before we pray them ... he knows Thomas is wrestling with unbelief ... and moves towards him and offers him what he needs
- Jesus' heart is for Thomas: this appearance seems to have been arranged for Thomas's sole benefit (see poem below)

When we, like Thomas, come to Jesus with a need – or even demand – to understand, Jesus responds with an invitation to stand under ... this is not to diminish the significance of intellect or understanding. It's just that, sometimes, what we need is not what we think we need. Sometimes, when we think the answer lies in 'If only I could understand ...' Jesus responds: 'If only you would stand under ...'

Thomas has been labelled throughout Christian history with the 'doubting' tag. I bet Jesus has never called him that. Jesus doesn't leave Thomas locked in his stereotype, but releases him to confess 'my Lord and my God.' The Spirit of Jesus stands ready to release you too ...

Spend some time this week 'standing under' the wonder of Jesus. Picture him upon the Cross, picture his wounds, his face, and glory in the fact that, if you were the only one in need, he'd still draw near ...

## Performance for an audience of one

If you had been the only one:  
Yours the only ticket sold;  
Your solitary bottom  
Spoilt for choice  
In an ocean of empty seats.  
If you had been  
The only one:  
He still would have staged  
The whole show.

The brooding, hovering chords  
Of the overture  
Unfolding  
For your ears only:  
Stars spinning out like Catherine wheels  
Across a dark but lightening set,  
Until dawn was uncorked  
On green home.

Act 1: the building of a nation:  
A people wooed and won  
And lost  
And won again.  
For you alone the whole cast  
Weaving and turning through dances  
To fill a joyous expanse of stage.

Act 2: the cry of a child  
In a vastly empty universe;  
The adventure of hope and betrayal;  
The seat-gripping climate:  
Triumph diving, death defying,  
Through the fiery hoop of tragedy.  
The clamour of the crowd scenes  
Building  
Toward an unimagined finale –  
A cosmos, purged of guilt  
Restored,  
Dressed for dancing.

If you had been the only one,  
Your grimy pounds  
The total take:  
He still would have staged  
The whole show  
And wept for joy  
At the warmth  
of your applause.

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