

Series: The Difference

April 17, 2016

Title: Thomas

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Text: John 20:24-29

Thomas?

And the winner is...

It was a simple assignment: walk out onto a stage; open an envelope; announce the 3rd place finisher for Miss Universe 2015; pause for several seconds to intensify the suspense; announce the Runner Up. The only girl left of the three finalists is Miss Universe.

Except it wasn't that easy. Host Steve Harvey inexplicably confused the runner up and the winner. As a result, Miss Columbia got to feel what it was like to be Miss Universe – for a couple of minutes. Then came the bad news, for her at least, and an unexpected surprise for Miss Philippines.

Poor Steve Harvey – he never saw that one coming. I'll bet he was wishing the floor would just open up and swallow him, instead of having to stand there amidst the wreckage of the 2015 Miss Universe pageant.

The Greatest Announcement:

So who would you have chosen to open the envelope and reveal to the whole wide world the true identity of the one person in all of human history who was God Himself come as one of us?

Wouldn't this person would have to be a person of deep faith and profound spiritual insight. They'd need to be a respected leader of God's people – someone everyone looked up to. They couldn't be someone who had a history of blurting out things that undermined the message.

In his gospel, John has carefully prepared us for this one greatest announcement. He begins the story by introducing us to a mysterious figure known only as "the Word." He tells us that The Word has been around from before the beginning of the world. He tells us that The Word not only was *with* God, but actually *was and is* God. He even tells us that this Word

became flesh and dwelled with him and his friends. They *saw* God's glory and splendor in this mysterious person.

The hints of the deeper reality of this person, whom we come to know as Jesus, pile up as the story progresses: He is Living Water, the Bread of Life, Light of the World, the Resurrection and the Life. He Himself says that if you have seen Him, you have seen Father God. Hints, riddles, mystery.

At the end of the story the time finally comes to explain the riddle and solve the mystery. It's time to open the envelope.

Who would be the best person for that all-important announcement?

Thomas?

The lights dim; the music stops. A lone figure walks out onto the stage with the envelope in his hand. We lean forward to see who it is who will announce to all of God's Creation who it is that is the Word made flesh – God With Us.

It isn't Peter, even though he had proclaimed that Jesus was The Holy One of God. It isn't the Beloved Disciple who has told the story for us and who stood at the foot of Jesus' cross beside Jesus' mother.

It's Thomas! Thomas? Thomas would seem to be the *least likely* person to open the envelope and announce to the world Jesus' truest and deepest identity. Shouldn't somebody run up onto the stage and snatch the envelope from him before he blows the big moment?

Thomas?

Seeing Is Believing

Thomas: The Pessimist

We first meet Thomas on the eve of Jesus' greatest miracle: the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Jesus has just announced that it's time to go "wake Lazarus up" from death. What a great moment for a disciple to stand beside Jesus and rally the troops for this triumph over Death!

Instead, Thomas says:

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John 11:16 NIV

Then Thomas (also known as Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

How's that for a downer? Whatever faith was in the air, Thomas did his best to drive it out. Jesus says "Life!" Thomas says "Death."

Not exactly the kind of person you would want opening the envelope.

Thomas: The Literalist

We meet Thomas a second time the night before Jesus dies. In the face of His coming death, He makes a wonderful and amazing promise:

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John 14:1-4 NIV

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me.

"My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?"

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"And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

"You know the way to the place where I am going."

Jesus has just proclaimed that He will conquer Death and return to them. Thomas thinks Jesus is talking about getting out of town. Maybe he is thinking that Jesus is planning some sort of escape to the desert where He and the disciples can regroup once again. So he blurts out:

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John 14:5 NIV

"Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"

No deep spiritual insight here! Thomas is stuck in the here-and-now.

Thomas: The Realist

Which brings us to the week after Easter. It turns out that Thomas missed the meeting on Easter evening when Jesus came and showed Himself alive

to the disciples. When he did catch up with them, they told him what happened:

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John 20:24-25a NIV

Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

Once again, Thomas responds in a way that raises serious questions about whether *he* should be the one to open the envelope and announce to the world that Jesus is truly God in human form!

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John 20:25b NIV

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

So there!

"Last weekend was tough on all of us. You all got together and had an 'experience.' You talked yourself into believing Jesus came to see you. Maybe it was His ghost? I don't know. But I'm not going there. I need proof positive if I'm going to believe something as fantastic as what you're saying!

"Unless I have proof, I will not believe. Period."

Poor Thomas: he's so anchored to the ground that he can't see the sky. Pessimist, Literalist, Realist. The last person on earth you would want to open the envelope and reveal Jesus' divine identity!

Believing *Is* Seeing

Personal Encounter:

And yet it was *Thomas* who received a personal visit from Jesus one week after Easter Sunday:

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John 20:26-27 NIV

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"

Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

Here was Thomas: the guy who had missed the meeting last weekend; the guy who had *refused* to believe his comrades; the pessimist/literalist/nose to the ground realist. No spiritual mystic here! No bold professions of faith. Seemingly no insight whatsoever into the reality of Jesus!

Yet for all that, Thomas *had made the meeting* this time. Beneath his pessimism and skepticism there was a hunger for Jesus.

Jesus met Thomas *right where Thomas was at*.

Announcement:

And so it is that Thomas finds himself standing on the stage under the bright lights with the envelope in his hand. He tears it open and makes the announcement that John's entire Gospel has been leading to – from the very first verse to the Sunday after Easter;

John 20:28 NIV

Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

The great prayer of Thomas' Jewish faith proclaimed:

Deuteronomy 6:4 NIV

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.

God has spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

Isaiah 43:11-12 NIV

"I, even I, am the LORD, and apart from me there is no savior. I have revealed and saved and proclaimed – I, and not some foreign god among you."

"You are my witnesses," declares the LORD, "that I am God."

Thomas has become *that witness*. It is his honor to declare that Jesus is Israel's – and all Creation's – LORD and God. But he does so in a way that is intensely *personal*. Thomas has come out of the cold. Jesus is not just Israel's God; He is "my Lord and my God."

Believing is Seeing:

Thomas stands on the line that divides the eyewitnesses of Jesus' resurrection from the rest of us. Jesus says to him:

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John 20:29 NIV

"Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Thomas had thought that it was essential for him to have physical proof in order to believe. But when he saw Jesus, he saw much more than a dead man come back to life. He saw his Lord and his God. He saw something that you can only see with the eyes of faith. He went from "seeing is believing" to "believing is seeing."

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Jesus promises you and me that even though we could never join the disciples in a locked room and experience His physical presence the way they did, we are blessed as they were not. Our path involves believing in order to see the glory of God.

It doesn't matter if we're pessimists like Thomas. It doesn't matter if we are literalists who always seem to be missing the deeper things. It doesn't matter if we're realists who need to see the facts before we decide. All we have to do is be willing for Jesus to meet us and take us on that life-transforming journey where believing leads to seeing.