

Encounter with Jesus – Thomas

In these services we are looking at people who have had an encounter with Jesus and the effect the encounter had on them. We have looked at several people who met Jesus physically during his ministry, through Peter and John and last time Joshua in the Old Testament. Tonight we are going to look at Thomas, who spent a lot of time with Jesus, but still had a special encounter with him after his death. Hilary is going to read us the story.

John 20:19 - 31

Who was Thomas?

There are seven other mentions of Thomas (also called Didymus which means “the twin”) by name in the New Testament outside of the passage Hilary has just read, but they give few details about him. There is one mention of him in each of Matthew, Mark, and Luke – all essentially listing him among the twelve apostles and saying he was one of those 12 sent out by Jesus to “Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons.” Luke records “So they set out and went from village to village, preaching the gospel and healing people everywhere. When the apostles returned, they reported to Jesus what they had done.” So Thomas had experienced the power of the Holy Spirit to heal people for himself, had seen Jesus doing many miracles and had heard all Jesus’ teaching. Thomas is mentioned two other times in John’s gospel, which give an indication of his character and understanding. The first is in Jn 11:16 when Jesus has withdrawn from Judea because the Jews were trying to stone him and has heard that Lazarus is sick. When Jesus tells the disciples he is going back to Judea to heal Lazarus Thomas says “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” So he had the intention of following Jesus come what may, but a rather pessimistic view of the outcome. He seems to have been a “cup half empty” kind of person. John also tells us in 14:5 that when Jesus told the disciples that he was going to prepare a place for them and they know the way to the place where he was going, Thomas replies “Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”, so his understanding of Jesus ministry and mission were not complete, although it would appear from the passage that he wasn’t the only apostle to be in that position. There are more mentions of the 12, the disciples or the apostles in the gospels of course, so he had also been at the Last Supper; in the garden when Jesus was arrested when he deserted him and fled; he had probably watched Jesus’ crucifixion (from a distance according to Lk 23:49) so he knew he was dead. The man he had followed for three years and had expected to be the King of Israel (probably in an earthly sense), killed by the rulers of Israel and the Romans. So Thomas was probably very distressed, afraid (the passage tells us the disciples had the door locked for fear of the Jews) and totally confused by the turn of events. He refuses to believe the other disciples when they tell him they have seen Jesus.

How did he encounter Jesus?

As we have already seen Thomas had had many encounters with Jesus during his three year ministry. However tonight I want to concentrate on the one he is remembered for and earned him the nickname of “doubting Thomas”. Jesus had appeared to the apostles in the evening of the Sunday of his resurrection, but Thomas was not with them when he appeared. When they told him they had seen Jesus he refuses to believe it and says “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 it.” He wanted hard physical proof before he would believe such an impossible thing had happened. Jesus initiates the encounter by appearing to the apostles again the following Sunday, when Thomas was with them. He appears among them, even though the doors were locked – unannounced, probably unexpected and startling. He starts with the same greeting as

on the first occasion "Peace be with you!" – to calm their surprise and alarm at seeing a dead man alive again – and possibly their subsequent excitement.

What happened during the encounter?

Jesus then directly challenges Thomas to do what he said he wanted to do - put his finger where the nails were, and put his hand into his side – and to stop doubting and believe. The passage does not record if Thomas actually did touch Jesus, but it makes clear that he accepts Jesus is alive and declares him to be his Lord and his God. Jesus then tells him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." This is a reference to us and all the believers since Jesus' ascension back into heaven who have believed in his death and resurrection for their salvation without seeing his physical body. John concludes his account of the encounter with a clear statement that he has included these events so "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." He is therefore directly addressing us.

What effect did the encounter have on Thomas?

The obvious effect is that he believed Jesus is alive and acknowledged him as Lord and God. Although there is only one other mention of Thomas by name after this in Acts 1:13 where it records he had been at the ascension and returned to Jerusalem with the other apostles and stayed with them. However in Acts 2:14 it records the events of Pentecost and says "Peter stood up with the Eleven", so Thomas was there and was "filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them". Tradition claims he travelled outside the Roman Empire to preach the Gospel, travelling as far as the states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala in present-day India. He is often regarded as the Patron Saint of India. So the encounter changed Thomas from a frightened, demoralised, doubting man into a courageous, believing apostle who spent his life preaching the gospel to non-believers.

Discussion – There are two questions for us here which I would like you to discuss in your groups and we'll then have a short feedback from each group:

Thomas saw Jesus after his death and resurrection and believed he was alive. Have you experienced an encounter with Jesus and know he is alive?

How has becoming a believer changed your life?