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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“THOMAS, RAISED WITH CHRIST”

John 20:24-31

☑ As a kid, I assumed that a saving relationship with the Lord guaranteed an ever-deeper experience of his presence. His voice would always and only be more distinct, his face clearer, his touch more palpable.

It has not worked out that way.

The Spirit of Christ is always with me, yet his self-revelation is unpredictable. One day he shows himself as though with a flourish of trumpets and unmistakable majesty – then the next day his voice goes silent, his face is invisible, his touch is imperceptible.

All too often I pull away from *him*, but I am not talking about that. I have in mind those moments when I seek the Lord and he seems not to show up.

❓ Can you identify with me? Is your experience at all similar?

I am not criticizing God! He is not a genie, who must appear when I rub the lamp; he is YHWH, the great I AM, Creator and Ruler of the Universe. Still, his seeming absence can arouse feelings of disappointment, disquiet, and distress within me.

This is hardest when it follows a sweet season of special closeness. Imagine, then, how difficult it was for Thomas when Jesus was taken from him!

■ Please turn with me to John 20:24-25: “**Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not**

**with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord!’ ¶ 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 it.’”**

History has nicknamed him Doubting Thomas. Is that entirely fair?

Admittedly, he is a bit of a skeptic. He is hesitant to draw conclusions and reluctant to jump on the bandwagon. But once he gives his trust, he is fiercely loyal.

● Earlier, in John chapter 11 {7-8} the Master stated that he was returning to Judea. The rest of the disciples were afraid and protested: “**Rabbi, a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you.**”

{Jn 11:16} But Thomas said to the others, “**Let us also go, that we may die with him.**” He was ready to risk his safety and survival in order to be with Messiah. Perhaps he should be called ‘Thomas the Brave!’

● {Jn 14:1-4} At the Last Supper the Lord announced that he was going to leave and prepare a place for them in his Father’s house. He assured them that they “**know the way to [that] place.**”

{Jn 14:5} Thomas replied, “**Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?**” He was not being argumentative; he just wanted to avoid taking a wrong turn! Perhaps he should be called ‘Thomas the Devout!’

{Mt 4:19} Nearly three years ago Jesus invited him to “**Come, follow me**” and Thomas did so. He left his

old life and embarked on a new one, observing the Lord's actions, absorbing his wisdom, obeying his instructions.

Thomas is curious by nature. When the Rabbi's teachings have perplexed him, he has posed additional questions. When the Master's conduct has surprised him, Thomas has requested clarification.

Even so, the greatest blessing of all has simply been being with Jesus. No doubt, he has taken for granted that they would always be together.

The longer Thomas has followed Messiah, the sweeter their fellowship. The voice and visage and being of Jesus have become increasingly clearer.

Now, all that is gone. When Christ was betrayed, Thomas' conviction was also betrayed. When Christ was beaten, Thomas' assurance took a beating. When Christ was nailed to the cross, Thomas's trust was nailed there. When Christ died, Thomas' faith died with him.

‡ Would Good Friday have brought out the best in us? It brings out the worst in Thomas.

He has heard the Savior's inspired teachings, many more than will be recorded in the Gospels. He has had a front row seat for the Lord's miracles. He has seen the Savior liberate the disabled, oppressed, fallen, and demonized. He has witnessed the Son's perfect character in every circumstance.

Still, he digs in his heels and says, "**I will not believe it**!" That is how badly this loss has shaken him.

■ In light of his attitude, Thomas is an unlikely candidate for a personal appearance by the risen Son. Yet

"**a week later**" (verses 26-27) all the disciples are together, and this time Thomas is with them.

**"Though the doors [are] locked, Jesus [comes] and [stands] among them and [says], 'Peace be with you!' Then he [says] to Thomas, 'Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.'"**

Thomas does believe – without "[putting his] **finger where the nails were,**" and without "[putting his] **hand into [Christ's] side.**"

■ His response in verse 28 is beautiful and ground-breaking: "**My Lord and my God!**" he says.

★ Thomas is the first mortal to call Jesus "**God.**"

(To be sure, John makes the divinity of Jesus explicit from the first verse of this Gospel; but he is writing several decades after the resurrection.) Until now, no human being has said "**my God!**" of Jesus, or to Jesus.

{Jn 1:38; 1:29; 1:49; 1:41; 1:34} Instead, they have addressed him as "**Rabbi**" (that is, *Teacher* and *Master*). They have called him "**Lamb of God,**" "**King of Israel,**" "**Messiah,**" and "**Son of God.**"

These are all titles of honor and authority. They distinguish the Nazarene as a uniquely exalted person whom YHWH has chosen for a special mission.

Nevertheless, in first century Jewish thought none of these titles – not even "**Son of God**" (!) –

conclusively identifies anyone as fully divine. With his confession, **“My Lord and my God!”** Thomas becomes the first to explicitly ascribe godhood to Jesus.

- {Col 3:1} He who has plummeted into the pit of despair is suddenly **“raised with Christ”** to the summit of joy!

‡ What facilitates this 180° turnaround? What enables Thomas to believe instantly and easily?

We might think the answer is a no-brainer. I mean, the guy has just seen Jesus with his own eyes. That would be enough for anyone, right?

But what do we read in Matthew 28:16-17, just before the risen Lord entrusts his followers with the Great Commission? **“The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some”** what? **“Some doubted.”**

{Mt 28:9-10; Lk 24:13-43; Jn 21; I Co 15:6-7} Even then, after the empty tomb and multiple post-resurrection appearances to Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other leading women; to Cleopas and his companion; to his gathered followers *without* Thomas on Resurrection Day; to the Eleven *with* Thomas in John 20; to seven apostles on the shores of Galilee; **“to more than five hundred brothers and sisters”** on a different occasion; and privately to James his half-brother – after all that, **“some doubted.”** Seeing is not necessarily believing.

✎ Do we stand in judgment on them? I suggest that we tremble in humility, cast ourselves on God’s mercy for

our own failures of faith, and prepare ourselves in advance to see the Risen Lord (with the eyes of our hearts) when he reveals himself.

- ★ This last action, self-preparation, is what equips Thomas to believe without touching the scars.

- We know this because of what Jesus said during the Last Supper: **“Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me... Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me... and I too will love them and show myself to them”** (John 14:19, 21).

**“I will ... show myself to”** (appear before, make myself manifest to) **“the one who loves me,”** who **“has my commands and keeps them.”**

Between Messiah’s resurrection and ascension into Heaven this included bodily appearances. Likewise, from his Second Coming forward we will see him in the flesh.

In the meantime, the Savior does not manifest himself in substantial physical form. He does show himself to us spiritually: in Scripture, through the ministry of his Spirit, in the words and actions of his people, through providential circumstances, in the Creation, and in dreams.

✎ As Christ Followers, we can prepare ourselves to perceive and believe him – even in seasons of agonizing struggle and loss. The key is *αγαπη* [agapē] love embodied in obedience.

{Mt 25} A verbal profession or emotional feeling of love is not sufficient. As we learn in the Parable of the

Sheep and the Goats, it is possible to say or to feel that you love Jesus and yet be self-deceived.

Love for Jesus consists of concrete obedience to his commands and principles. No mortal human loves perfectly; yet we who love Messiah do grow in the knowledge and practice of his law.

Thomas struggled with doubt, yet he loved the Lord with courageous, devout obedience. He was ready to see and to trust.

Following Christ does not guarantee an ever-deeper experience of his presence. One day his manifestation is unmistakable; the next he seems not to show up.

But silence, invisibility, and intangibility do not imply absence. He is still there.

Let us prepare to perceive and believe when Messiah does make his presence known. Like our brother Thomas, let us love him with obedience.

John 20:24-31 is the word of the Lord.