

John Docherty, April 23, 2017
Thomas, the loyal disciple

John is the only evangelist who pays any attention to Thomas. He's mentioned only once in each of the synoptic gospels, and even then only as part of a list of names of the twelve apostles.

Like most of the others who make up "the twelve" he's a bit of a non-entity. Peter and Judas get a little more coverage than the others, for fairly obvious reasons, but Thomas is largely invisible as far as the evangelists are concerned.

Only John gives us a bit of a peak into the character of this man, beyond the simple fact that he was part of Jesus' innermost circle.

I know Thomas often gets a bit of a bad rap. "Doubting Thomas" has come into English as something of an insult – or at least as something of a disparaging remark – usually directed at someone who lacks faith, or who doesn't have the courage to trust that something is attainable.

Generally speaking, the only time we usually hear anything of Thomas, it's in relation to this passage we read from John 20 : "... 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."

That declaration casts him in the light of a person who is resistant to the truth, who refuses to have faith enough to believe even when those around him swear to what they have seen.

The implication is that he should have accepted the word of the other apostles if he really believed that Jesus was the Messiah, and that he is somehow less worthy than the other ten as a result of this lack of faith.

It's not a flattering spin on the representation of the man, and it warrants, I think, a closer look, if for no other reason that I think John has a clear affection and respect for Thomas.

For one thing, he wasn't alone in his incredulity.

For example, we're told in the Gospel of Luke that when Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women who had discovered

Jesus' body missing from the tomb ran to the other disciples and told them of what they'd found, the disciples' take on their news is that it "... seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. ..."

We're not told if Thomas was among them at that point, but even if he was, I don't see any reason to think that the fact of Jesus' body being missing from the tomb would, of itself, convince the disciples of anything yet. I can think of any number of explanations of how Jesus' body came to be absent from the tomb, and I think any rational person would consider the "natural" explanations before jumping to the "supernatural" explanations.

We're told in Matthew's Gospel that the religious leaders had already come up with a plausible explanation that they were broadcasting about : that Jesus' disciples had come to the tomb in the middle of the night and carried off the body.

Now the disciples knew that wasn't the case, but I think they might reasonably have wondered if the religious or political leaders hadn't carried off the body themselves in some kind of plan to implicate the disciples in some nefarious plot to discredit them.

The disciples clearly hadn't yet understood fully who Jesus was, and they were terrified by his crucifixion and the risk they themselves now ran. The fact that Thomas specifies he won't believe unless he can put his hand in Jesus' side, suggests that he was present at the crucifixion, and was witness to the lance being thrust into Jesus' body. He *knew* Jesus was dead.

In Jesus' first appearance to them in the locked room – the appearance at which Thomas was absent – we're told by John that they rejoiced when they saw him.

Matthew, on the other hand, says that when Jesus appeared to them, "... they worshipped him, but some doubted ..."

Mark tells us that Jesus "... upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen. "

Luke, for his part, tells us that when Jesus appeared to the disciples in the room, "... They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. "

So it shouldn't come as any surprise that Thomas has his doubts. I suppose, on one level, his disbelief isn't so much a lack of faith in Jesus (after all, none of them

expected Jesus to rise from the dead), as it is a lack of trust in the other apostles.

Did they really see Jesus? Are they reliable? Have they been tricked somehow?

In some of the appearances that the evangelists mention, for example, the people who meet Jesus don't even recognize him at first. Mary Magdalene mistakes him for the gardener; the disciples on the road to Emmaus don't recognize him until he breaks bread with them; even after the appearances we're told about in the locked room, the disciples who are fishing in the Sea of Tiberias, including Peter, don't recognize him at first either.

So there's clearly something about Jesus' appearance that leaves room for doubt. Is it really Jesus?

So what's going on with Jesus? Is Thomas wrong to wonder if he can trust that the other apostles are not mistaken in believing that they've seen Jesus?

Let's not forget that Thomas is also described by John as "Thomas, the twin". So ... has Thomas regularly been mistaken for his own brother? Does he know how easy it is for people to jump too quickly to certain assumptions?

In my own case, I regularly get mistaken for someone else. At least once a month, someone stops me in the street to greet me. I'm occasionally me, and the person has recognized me, but I'm usually not me, as far as they are concerned, and they are convinced I'm some other person.

And it doesn't seem to matter where in the world I am.

I've been approached in a crowd in Port-au-Prince by someone who was sure I was a prof who taught theology at the Bible college in Cap Haitien. I wasn't.

I've been approached in Nairobi by a man from Botswana who was sure I was a professor at Oxford. I'm not.

I was approached by a man on the streets of London, England, who was sure I was an old friend. I wasn't.

Just last week, I was in a shopping mall near our house. As I started down an escalator, there were three or four teenage girls at the bottom who turned around, looked at me, giggled, then started singing "Vive le vent, vive le vent, vive le vent

d'hiver ...”

Now these girls were crafty. They were close enough for me to hear them, but not close enough for me to chase them down and get their names to put them on my naughty list.

It *is* true that Jesus rebukes all of the disciples for not believing their own eyes. And it is *also* true that the other apostles have the advantage over Thomas of having seen Jesus with their own eyes at his first appearance in the locked room. I think it's only reasonable for Thomas to be given the benefit of the doubt that he expresses, given that all of them shared that doubt at some point.

And, to his credit, let's not lose sight either of the fact that Thomas is the only one who is quoted as responding to seeing Jesus by crying out “My Lord, and my God!” That's no small declaration.

And it's a particularly poignant declaration from a man who, earlier in John's Gospel, is quoted as encouraging his fellow-disciples to accompany Jesus to Bethany where they fully expected that Jesus would be killed. John quotes Thomas, in what I think is the most touching expression of loyalty and love for Jesus that we have anywhere in the New Testament, as saying “... let us also go, that we may die with him ...”

It's an echo of what Jesus himself says to his disciples later in John's gospel, at the last supper, when he tells them that “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. “

So, what are we to make of all of this?

What does this snapshot of Thomas have to say to us about belief and faithfulness?

John himself tells us that he includes all of these stories of Jesus' life “... so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name ...”

That's *John's* purpose in telling us of these events.

For myself, I think these glimpses of Thomas give us a peak into the heart of a man who was a leader in his own right, capable of standing his ground and insisting on being provided with more than just the words of his friends that something as

monumental as Jesus' resurrection had happened.

He knew only too well that all of the disciples had deserted Jesus at Gethsemane. He may have known that Peter denied Jesus three times before his crucifixion. He certainly was aware that Judas, one of the intimates of Jesus, had been the one to betray him.

Was he absent on that first appearance of Jesus because he had lost faith – not in Jesus, but in Jesus' apostles, and didn't see the point in meeting with them? I don't know.

I *do* know that all of us need to ground our own faith in that which seems trustworthy to *us*.

For all of us, it will involve trust.

It will involve a willingness to step outside of ourselves and embrace something that can't be proven by empirical methods.

We don't have the option of demanding that we be able to put our finger in the holes made by the nails, or place our hand in Jesus' side. But we *do* have options.

For some of us, it will be a steadfast adherence to a particular understanding of how to read this Book - though some of what we will find in this Book may sometimes make us uncomfortable.

For some of us, it will be a personal experience of a sense of the presence of God - though it may sometimes feel like God has abandoned us.

For some of us, it will be a trust born of the example of the faithful lives of those who have gone before us, or of those who make up this circle - though we will surely disappoint from time to time.

For some of us, it may be all of the above, and perhaps things that I haven't thought of.

So, tell me, what is the basis of *your* trust?