

Courageous Thomas

Scriptures: Jonah 2:1-9, John 20: 19 – 31, Psalm 16

Illustration: Let's talk a little bit about brand labels this morning. I have a few food labels to start. Take out one by one and ask people if they know what these represent? Try things like OUMA rusks, OMO washing powder, JUNGLE OATS, COKE and so on. Then use a clothes brand – perhaps a NIKE or a RED brand or something like that.

So I think that it is safe to assume that we know our brands. Well, we certainly know these products well, and if we were given a choice of another brand – perhaps even a 'no name brand' we would spot the difference a mile away. OK, well, now that we have mastered these labels and brands, let's talk about a slightly different kind of brand label – the labels that we put on other people. Here are a few examples:

- Street people/children
- Black/white
- Afrikaans, Zulu, English
- Gangster
- Traditional/ Modern
- Foreigner
- Muslim/Jew/Hindu

Often these labels we put on people are made out of some experience or idea of what we think is inside the other person. Sometimes we are even labelled by other people – they take one look at us and we are given a label.

Now this brings me to our man today, Thomas. He has been given a label – in fact he was given this label just after Jesus' resurrection – that is **"Doubting Thomas."**

Notice that he was never given this label by the Gospel writers, or by Jesus, he was given the label by us. John still refers to him by his birth name **'Didymus', meaning Twin**, so even though he experienced this moment of doubt, John never gave him a label - 'doubter!'

Now, today I am coming out all guns blazing in defence of Thomas and I am opting to call him 'Courageous Thomas.' I want to start a movement called "The Courageous Thomas Movement" and if you want to sign up you can – so far my group has 3 members and that's me and my two dogs 😊

Anyway, I am joking about the support club, but I am serious about correcting the label given to Thomas. Yes, it is clear that he Doubted Jesus' resurrection for about let us see – a whole 7 and a half days, but let's try and give the guy a little credit.

Let me share with you another reason why I think it is “unfair” to label him like this. All of us have done or said something in our lives that was either embarrassing, hurtful, sinful, or just plain stupid.

Think about one of those things for a moment. Do you have it in your mind right now?

Good, now can you imagine if we all labelled you on that one thing, for the rest of your life?

I mean just the thought of this makes me feel embarrassed – I can imagine how many labels I would be wearing around my neck this morning. Aish, that would be hectic.

So, the Bible mentions Thomas’ name 11 times, with a few of these including his name in a list of disciples. But it is only mentioned once in connection with Doubt – this passage we are looking at today?

Of the accounts we have in the Bible, Thomas opens his mouth to speak 4 times and only once is it a statement of doubt. Here are the others:

- **John 11:16** - Then Thomas (also known as Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with him.’

1. This is a Statement of Courage!

- **John 14:5** - [Jesus the way to the Father] Thomas said to him, ‘Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?’

2. This is an Honest Question!

- **John 20:25** – “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.”

3. This is a Statement of Doubt and Pain!

- **John 20:28** - Thomas said to him, ‘My Lord and my God!’

4. This is a Statement of Belief!

So I am coming to Thomas rescue and instead of labelling him after the 3rd time he speaks, I am rather going for the first statement he makes – the one of dedication, bravery, courage and commitment to Jesus.

May I introduce you to COURAGEOUS THOMAS! **OR** “Thomas the Brave!”

Ok, friends, let me come down off my hobby-horse for a moment and reflect on the doubting aspect of his life. The reason why I think that his name/label of doubting Thomas has stuck with us for so long, is that it resonates with us. It certainly resonates with me.

There is something in his complete honesty that frees me up to be honest before Jesus. There is even something courageous about it too.

Thomas is confronted by the other 10 disciples (and the women) with the news that Jesus is alive and that he has appeared to them. It is not in Thomas' nature to say, "Oh well, if you guys say so, then I believe you." That is not him!

- **William Barclay** – "There is more ultimate faith in the person who insists on being sure than in the person who glibly repeats things which they have never thought out, and which they may not really believe."

He was always willing to speak his mind. If he felt he needed to go and die with Jesus in Jerusalem, he said it; if he felt he needed Jesus to clarify a statement, he asked the question. So, why would he be out of character now? He speaks his mind. Interesting how we consider this to be a STRENGTH for Simon Peter, but for Thomas it is a fault!

- **John 20:25** – "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."

Sure, there is a huge element of doubt in this, but there is also a large dose of pain and confusion. Anyone who has suffered a great loss or gone through trauma will tell you, that your heart is deeply wounded and fragile in the days and weeks after a huge loss. So, Thomas has had barely 10 days and for some reason he wasn't in the room with the disciples the first time Jesus made an appearance – so let's give him a little grace.

Thomas was experiencing what I want to call "**A Dilution of Hope.**"

He loved Jesus and had seen in Jesus the hope of a new way of life. Perhaps political, economic, but definitely in terms of Religion. There was a new spring in Thomas' step – Jesus was the hope of the world. Truth, Freedom, Life, Relationship – all that had been missing from their faith, was now before his very eyes – yet in the blink of an eye, it had been taken away from them all. Thomas had seen Jesus die on the cross. He had watched them carry his body away. That was the end! And he probably hadn't stop mourning since.

And we can all relate to that friends, can't we?

We have had HOPE in something or someone and then we experience a 'Dilution of Hope.' Our hope is tainted and changed.

So, if this glass jug represents our HOPE – before anything happens, things look clear and good. But suddenly the 'event' or 'situation' happens and it is like someone has poured colouring into our glass jar of clear water. It is becoming diluted. And the more this happens, so the more our outlook changes.

Until, eventually, the danger is our whole life has a discoloured hope.

So, what is the event that can change all of this? What can change the water back? Well for Thomas it was an encounter with Jesus. An encounter with the RISEN LORD JESUS changes Thomas forever and it can change us all together as well.

Let's pick up the story in John 20 again:

²⁶ 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!' ²⁷ 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.'

²⁸ Thomas said to him, 'My Lord and my God!'

Thomas was fortunate enough to have a personal encounter with Jesus – face to face. And remember his words of 'doubt' – "I won't believe unless I can put my finger here and there..." WELL, he didn't even need to do that in order to be convinced. Thomas had loudly expressed what he wanted in order to believe, but even though Jesus offered it to him he didn't need it. It just took one look from Jesus and he was on his knees declaring:

"My Lord and my God!"

All along THOMAS has been a true believer, but he had experience dilution of Hope. And perhaps this may be true for many of us who are struggling in our faith today. Perhaps we are wrestling with the Lord and negotiating with him, saying things like "unless, this happens or that event changes" then I just can't carry on. Perhaps our doubts are diluting our hope in Jesus and we think that we need more proof.

But, perhaps we don't need proof. Perhaps we just need a WORD from God or an Encounter with Jesus and our HOPE will slowly start coming alive again. Perhaps a word like:

- **Psalm 33:18** - But the eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love,
- **Isaiah 40:31** - but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

"Strength is rising, strength is rising...."

- **John 20:21** – "Peace be with you!"

If you are feeling disillusioned about Life or even perhaps God, why not pray the prayer of Jonah:

"To the roots of the mountains I sank down;
the earth beneath barred me in for ever.
But you brought me up from the pit, O Lord my God.

When my life was ebbing away,
I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you..." – **Jonah 2:6-7**

Friends, we need to remember that the Gospel teaches us that we are powerless to save ourselves from our sin and mess. It is only Jesus who can do that. If you look at Jonah, he landed up in the belly of the whale because of his bad decisions, yet he knew that he was still able to pray to God to rescue him. So whether, our hope is diluted by our own bad choices or those of others, we can still turn to Jesus.

With Jesus there is always HOPE!

- "Once you choose hope, anything's possible." ~ **Christopher Reeve**
- "Hope is some extraordinary spiritual grace that God gives us to control our fears, not to oust them." ~**Vincent McNabb**

SO let's come back to my friend, COURAGEOUS THOMAS. What happened to him after this 'doubting episode? Well, he appears twice more in the Bible. Immediately afterwards in John 21, we find him with 7 of the other disciples – he is back with vengeance and part of the team. And then in Acts 1:13 – just as the early Church is about to be explode into the world – he is there.

Thomas' legacy – We are not sure of what actually happened to Thomas in the end, but there is an apocryphal book called the 'Acts of Thomas', which speaks of him going to what we now know as India. There is a church in the South of India, called the Thomist Church, which traces its origins to him. He was so changed by the encounter with Jesus – so convinced in Jesus as the son of God that he went as a missionary to a land that was half way around the world.

Final Word:

John 20:30-31 - *Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are 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.*

May your questions, doubt and despair rather drive you to see out JESUS than turning your back on him. God has some work for you to do and he believes in you!