

Introduction: We marveled in last week's notes to behold the power of the Word of God in the hands of the Holy Spirit to bring a new heart and saving faith to Rahab – mired in immorality, paganism and idolatry. But while we marvel at Rahab's Word-based faith, and the thorough work of converting grace which God accomplished in her life *without preachers, signs or dramatic conversion events* – we are dismayed by Thomas' stubborn refusal to believe in the Resurrection of His Savior, even though Jesus had repeatedly instructed him and all the disciples in the hope and reality of this Easter event! So, we turn with a good deal of incredulity in this week's Bible notes to Thomas' fit of unbelief in the latter half of John 20.

Mon/Tues: read John 20:17-19. Mary receives with joy Jesus' commission to go and tell the disciples about His rising in John 20:17-18. She goes immediately to make this announcement! We know this because the Greek present tenses in verse 18, meaning literally that Mary, "*comes announcing* that she has seen the Lord", throw the stress upon Mary's immediate departure on her mission, as New Testament scholar Donald Guthrie points out. Her eagerness also finds expression in the fact that, before she can deliver the message about Jesus' ascension, she blurts out the really stunning words, "I have seen the Lord." She will never forget how Christ revealed Himself to her that Easter morning!

Moreover, as Mary goes with such dispatch to announce Jesus' resurrection, she goes as the first witness to whom Jesus manifested Himself. Mary's testimony is, therefore, what Jeff Mallinson in *Modern Reformation* calls "an authenticating mark" of the truth of John's account of Christ's resurrection. That a woman should be chosen by God to bear this great news *is patently not* what any fabricated Gospel would do – since a woman's testimony in first century Jewish law was considered insufficient to establish the truth of a matter. But God chooses Mary to show that His truth is established firmly by even the weakest of human agents!

Meditate and Pray: "Lord, please use even the weakest part of your creation to establish the truth of your Gospel in the hearts of sceptics like Thomas! Thank you that, because of your might, you do not need dramatic testimonies or carnal miracles to impress people to believe in your Son. Your Spirit works effectively when most unseen and unappreciated! Amen!" Sing about this truth in Frederick Faber's hymn:

*Workman of God! O lose not heart,
But learn what God is like;
And in the darkest battlefield
Thou shalt know where to strike.*

*Thrice blest is he to whom is giv'n
The instinct that can tell
That God is on the field, when He
Is most invisible.*

*Then learn to scorn the praise of men,
And learn to lose with God;
For Jesus won the world through shame,
And beckons thee His road.*

*For right is right, since God is God,
And right the day must win;
To doubt would be disloyalty,
To falter would be sin.*

Weds/Thurs: read John 20:18-25. Leaving aside for now the awesome commission of Christ as He equips the 10 Apostles to go forth with the message of forgiveness of sins in John 20:19-23, we note from verse 24 that Thomas did not gather with the others when Christ appeared that first Easter evening. We don't know why he was absent, but his response when the others tell him in verse 25 that they have seen the Lord is to emphatically refuse to believe it.

His double negative in the Greek means literally, "I do not, no not all, believe it to be possible that Jesus rose from the dead, unless I see and touch His wounds." Thomas could not be more adamant about his unbelief.

Meditate and Pray: Is it credible that Thomas should demand that he be given the right to handle the holy body of the Resurrected Lord like someone handles a piece of meat to determine if it is worth the price at the grocery? Such a demand flies in the face of all the teaching He received from the Lord before His death and is

contemptuous of the authority and presence of God in his life. How could Thomas progressively descend not only into doubt, but even to disrespect, despite all his former privileges under Christ's loving tutelage? Is this all the impression that Thomas' being three years with Christ produced in his life? It is a shocking falling away! John Calvin writes:

“Thus it happens that, when we render to the word of God less honor than is due to it, there steals upon us, without our knowledge, a growing obstinacy, which brings along with it a contempt of the word of God, and makes us lose all reverence for it. So much the more earnestly should we labor to restrain the wantonness of our minds, that none of us, by improperly indulging in contradiction, and extinguishing, as it were, the feeling of piety, may block up against ourselves the gate of faith.”

Fri/Sat: read John 20:24-27. Perhaps we find it easy to criticize Thomas' adamant refusal to believe the disciples' testimony of seeing the Risen Lord. Indeed, his attitude must have vexed the others greatly. It may be that, because of Thomas' refusal to believe, we find the Apostles one week later in the upper room with the door locked (John 20:26) - still struggling to help their doubting brother - instead of heading to Galilee to meet Christ, which the angel at the tomb had directed them to do in Mark 16:7 and Matthew 28:9. (*So the commentator Alfred Plummer theorizes.*)

Was Thomas holding the whole fellowship back because of his doubts about not only the Resurrection but also the very Word of God which had promised that Christ would rise? One thing is for sure. *Real believers can at times* be what Iain Murray called, “unbelieving believers”. I implore you, therefore, look at Thomas in this way! Rather than shunting him aside as abnormal, and uniquely deserving of the moniker, “doubting Thomas”, realize that *you too* may have your ‘evil hour’ of doubt! Many sincere believers do!

Poor Thomas! Imagine the pain for him, who *was a real disciple and a believing follower of Christ* - who had been willing in John 11:16 to go and “die” with Christ in hostile Judea – and on whom Jesus pronounced the verdict in the upper room, “You are clean” (John 13:10) ... to now have nothing to hold onto but a dead Christ! That is how deep in despairing doubt Thomas had sunk! He was an “unbelieving believer”.

I wonder what you would think of this week's Bible notes if we stopped at this very sore but urgent low point for Thomas in John 20:24-27? Such a pause would not mean that I declare *Thomas' doubts to be normal or acceptable for the long term*. I don't want us to go away *comfortable* with Thomas' despair. But I would want to stir up within you a spirit of compassionate prayer for those you may know in Thomas' position, and a willingness to struggle with such until you can bring them to Jesus, as the Twelve brought their brother into the upper room in John 20:26.

Meditate and Pray: John Owen, the great Puritan, models for us how we should treat the Thomases we know when they are paralyzed with guilt, fear and doubt:

“Why do I say that I will not judge a person to be spiritually dead, whom I have judged formerly to have had a spiritual life, though I see him at present in a swoon as to all evidences of spiritual life? The reason why I will not judge so is this, - because if you judge a person dead, you neglect him, you leave him; but if you judge him in a swoon, though never so dangerous, you use all means for the retrieving of his life. So ought we to do to one another and our own souls.”

Sunday: read John 20:27-29. Of course, we cannot end with Thomas' doubts after all! For Christ appears again *uninvited and unexpected* in John 20:26! All of a sudden, the Lord who had met with them one week earlier appeared once again – walking right through the locked doors (John 20:26)! Walking right through the

locked heart of Thomas! Walking right through the barred gates of our unbelief and rebellious thoughts and words! Uttering the words of His great, militant, all-conquering peace: “Peace be with you.”

Then, (can it be true dear Thomas?), you hear from the very lips of the Lord whom you have not seen alive until now ... that *He knew all that you had spoken against Him! Christ reads Thomas' doubting heart and invites him to do precisely what he so brazenly demanded* – “Put your hands in my nail prints and in my side!” I think more than anything else, it was this power of Christ to be able to recite back to Thomas the very doubts that had gripped his heart ... It was this power to read Thomas' mind, that caused him to bow the knee and confess Christ's Lordship! As Leon Morris puts it:

"At the sight of Jesus all Thomas' doubts vanished and he did not need to apply any of his tests. It is possible that it was the words of Jesus more than anything which brought conviction, for they showed that Jesus was perfectly aware of what Thomas had laid down as his demands. How did Christ come by this knowledge unless He was there unseen when Thomas expressed his doubts to his brethren? Perhaps we should mention here that some think Thomas did actually put his finger into the nailprints and his hand into the spearwound. They think that if Jesus commanded him, he had no choice. But John says nothing of the sort and it seems improbable. It is much more likely that Jesus' words give us the truth of the matter in John 20:29: 'Because you have **seen** me, you have believed.'" (Leon Morris)

Meditate and Pray: Let us give thanks that is the *Word of the Almighty Christ* which rescues Thomas as that Word renews faith and enables Thomas to persevere in continuing to believe in the Savior whom he had followed right up to the Cross. Now, because Christ's Word has come to Thomas anew, saving faith in him is revived as he is able to confess, “My Lord and My God”!

Let us pray for many we know and love who have fallen away in these dark days from the faith they once held onto securely. Ask the Lord to revive them as His children – by the Spirit who gives life to the Word of Christ. Pray for such “unbelieving believers” using the words of hymn # 455, “And Can It Be” – for surely the very same regenerating power of Christ celebrated in this hymn is used again and again in our lives, each time the Lord Jesus renews our flagging faith! May the Lord Jesus bring His blazing Gospel into the dungeons of our doubting hearts and may we receive “the kindling ray of Christ's gaze” once again!

*And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Savior's blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain—
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be,
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?
(Refrain) Amazing love! How can it be,
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?*

*Still the small inward voice I hear,
That whispers all my sins forgiven;
Still the atoning blood is near,
That quenched the wrath of hostile Heaven.
I feel the life His wounds impart;
I feel the Savior in my heart.
(Refrain)*

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray—
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.
(Refrain)*

*No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in Him, is mine;
Alive in Him, my living head,
And clothed in righteousness divine,
Bold I approach th' eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.
(Refrain)*