

**“In Defense of True Character”  
(A Dramatic Sermon)  
John 20:19-31  
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Well, here I am again, going about the world, trying to do what I can to protect my name. After enough time passes, your name is about all you have, your reputation, your standing in history. And about this time of year, the week after Easter, you people are always reading about me and casting aspersions. You know it's true.

“Doubting Thomas” you call me, as if this is simply who I am. What a load of *skubula*, refuse, dung, nonsense. Just because someone comes up with a catchy adjective to describe a person, whether that someone is a meanspirited bully with a Twitter account or anyone else, doesn't mean the adjective fits. This one does not fit me!

But I'm not the only one this has happened to, I'm not the only biblical character to have been maligned, by the church itself. Consider Mary Magdalene, who people insist to this day was a woman of ill repute, a prostitute, a... you know... She was not! Not only is she never called this in scripture; I knew her. She was not!

So, how did she come to be so maligned? Well, in the year 591 C.E., Pope Gregory I, also called “The Great” by some, though not by me, don't mess with my friends... he did it, in a sermon. Be careful of those, my friends.

Anyway, he conflated three biblical stories, not accurately understanding any of them, and concluded that Mary was a prostitute. It is referred to in scholarly circles as the wh... Oh, I can't say that here, can I? Tender ears and all... Well, let me tell you what tender ears really need to learn – not to lie about people, not to defame another person's character.

So, why did he do it? Perhaps he just misunderstood, some argue, but I don't believe that. Women were growing too strong in the eyes of some, men mostly. They were equal partners in the early days, they

were among Jesus' closest followers, they were the ones who stuck around until the end, Mary especially. They were growing too strong for some of the men. So, something had to be done, especially with a woman like Mary Magdalene.

I mean, she was not married, as far as we knew, though there were rumors; she had no children, like Mary the mother of Jesus. Such a woman was by definition, dangerous, in the eyes of some. So, she needed to be brought down a few pegs, discredited, made into a prostitute. And it worked! To this day, millions, even in the church, continue to spread this lie.

I'm not sure why people started calling me "Doubting Thomas", I don't know that the intent was quite as malevolent as it was with Mary, I just know it was wrong and it has stuck. Jesus did tell me not to doubt, but to believe, and I did believe. In fact, I gave the highest confession you will find in the Bible, as I called him, "My Lord and my God!"

It is true that I did not accept the testimony of the others who had seen him on the evening of the resurrection, but how was I different from them? They didn't believe until they saw him. Peter and the other disciple saw the tomb empty and weren't sure, Mary took a while to recognize Jesus when she saw him, and then all of them got to see him again that evening. They struggled to believe just as much I did. The only difference was that I was not there with them that first night.

Why was I not there? I don't know. Misery does love not just company, but equally miserable company. Everyone was devastated when he died and then we moved on pretty quickly to fear. If they killed him, they just might come looking for his inner circle of friends. We too were at risk, whether the early stories about resurrection were true or not. So, they all hid away in fear, together, finding comfort in each other's company.

I wasn't so sure it would make any difference if I was alone or with others. Don't some of you prefer to be alone in your grief, if not your fear? That was the case for me. Am I to be judged for this quirk of my personality? If I am, call me, "Loner Thomas", not "Doubting Thomas" because I was a believer. As soon as I saw what everyone else saw, that Jesus was alive, I believed, and I made my strong confession.

And just let me add this – I had always been a person of strong faith. Even in John’s telling of the story - and you may or may not know there was some tension between us and the communities linked to our names - but even in his telling, I come across as a person of strong faith. In the eleventh chapter, when Jesus talks about going near Jerusalem to help Lazarus, even though there are threats on his life, I am the one who says, “Let us also go, that we may die with him (John 11:16).” I am the one who confesses him as my Lord and my God. And later, I write my own version of the story, *The Gospel According to Thomas*.

I just wouldn’t take their word for it that Jesus was alive any more than they would have taken mine. I was like Nathaniel who wouldn’t take Philip’s word for it that he had found the Messiah, but had to see for himself (John 1:43-49). I was like many of the people the woman who met Jesus at the well told about him. They only believed when they met him for themselves (John 4:42). I wanted to see for myself, I didn’t want a secondhand faith. I needed to confirm any claim, especially this one, with my own experience.

I know your text reports that Jesus said to me, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” And he may have, I don’t remember his exact words, but if he said this, he was talking about people like you, not anyone who was with me at the time, because none of them believed without seeing; none of them, I assure you.

My faith was as strong as anyone else’s, perhaps stronger, precisely because it was mine, it was firsthand, it was based on personal experience that no one could convince me was misguided. “My Lord and my God,” I said to Jesus because he was standing there right in front of me, alive; the same Jesus I had seen, from a distance, a safe distance, die. He still had the wounds in his hands and his side, but he was alive. It was and is amazing...

So, I hope I can persuade you to quit calling me by that ugly Twitter-like handle. I am not a doubter. This term does not define my character, it is not who I am. But I also hope I can persuade you of a few other things. I am not here just to clear my name. I am not that self-absorbed and smallminded.

For one thing, I hope I can persuade you not to bully people with labels, try to limit them in this way, and I hope I can convince you not to accept the labels other people might try to put on you - not good enough, failure, stupid, silly, misfit, middle child, bad kid, no count, ugly sister, weak brother. You've heard them all, haven't you? Why would you let anyone define you in this way?

What any bully does says more about the bully than the person he/she is trying to bully, even when it comes to labelling people in a meanspirited way. Pay them no attention. The only One worthy of defining you is the One who made you who says you are a beloved child of God, made in God's own image, made for a good and holy purpose. How dare anyone try to claim otherwise?!

I also hope I can persuade you to sort out your own faith, just as I did, risk criticism if you must, but ask your own questions, take your own experience seriously, value your own perceptions. God does.

As I understand it, this is something you people in particular, "Baptists" you are called, value highly. Indeed, you stake your whole way of doing church on this principle, the value of individual belief, the privilege and responsibility of each person to sort out his/her faith before God. I've always wondered what kind of believer I am, maybe this is it, a Baptist. I certainly resonate with your independent spirit.

So, don't bully other people or let them bully you with names and labels that seek to reduce your worth, but do insist on sorting out your own faith, asking your own questions. Then, realize that this is the only kind of faith that matters, one that is genuine and personal, and once you have this kind of faith, nothing can take it away.

A wise friend said that honesty is the one thing God wants most from us. God would rather have us believe just one thing about God and really believe it than spout a long list of platitudes that seem to be right to someone else. God wants honesty, even if it is shaped more by questions and doubts than would-be correct convictions, because God knows what we believe in our hearts anyway, and God knows that only the truth can help us in times of hardship and distress.

Think about the most difficult times in your life. Perhaps you lost someone dear or you lost a job or some other opportunity; a relationship

fell apart, your vision of your future collapsed in a moment. What proved most helpful at the time? It wasn't something someone else told you was true. Was it? It wasn't some belief that was supposed to be important, you weren't sure why. It wasn't some pious platitude spouted by a zealous friend. Was it?

It was something central to your very being, something you knew to be true through your own experience, perhaps just the assurance of God's presence and love no matter what. It's the personal that sticks with us, that sustains us, that keeps us on our feet when nothing else will. Coming to this sort of faith can be challenging, it takes time and risks criticism, but in the end, it is ours and nothing can take it away.

I may not have been there the evening of Jesus' resurrection. I may not have taken the word of others. I may have insisted on seeing for myself. But when I did, I believed with a passion that rivalled anyone else's, I called him my Lord and my God, and I gave my life to him. That is a faith worth waiting for, a faith that endures.

So, don't rush it, don't sweat it if others give you a hard time, don't accept anything other than what your own experience confirms and your own heart can embrace. And don't, don't call me Doubting Thomas ever again!

There is show in your time called MythBusters which investigates certain claims. One episode examined the phrase "like a bull in a china shop" which assumes that as bulls crash through china, destroying everything, some people have no sensitivity to others. The latter may be true, but as it turns out, not the former, bulls are not so oblivious. Who knew? They actually try to avoid fragile china. It has been proven.

In like manner, there may be people you know who are consumed with doubts and thus, seemingly never capable of accepting anything on faith. That is a pity, but don't call them "Thomas" because this guy has faith. The myth has been busted once and for all. Let it go and I will try to do the same, but most of all, be who you are and be proud of it, find your own faith and hold on to it, believe what you discover to be true and that will be enough. Trust me, with our God and with Jesus, that will be enough.