

John 20:19-31

Theme: Mercy for those who doubt

Nicknames are fun. Where do they come from? Why do people get them? People get nicknames based on where they're from, distinguishing characteristics, or something they said or did that ends up encapsulating them. Alexander the Great and Vlad the Impaler. You got the Sultan of Swat and Magic Johnson. Elvis is the King of Rock and Michael Jackson is the King of Pop. What about the Bible? Solomon the Wise who did foolish things; Simon called Peter who crumbled, and today, Doubting Thomas who deserves a new nickname because his isn't accurate or merciful. Mercy for those who doubt, that's the way to go.

This section of John is a display of Jesus being merciful and patient with people who love him, who want to know him more, but who also doubt. Jesus is so understanding and gentle with Thomas, because he is merciful to those who doubt. Jude, Jesus brother, certainly knew that. Jude, it seems, didn't believe in Jesus as Savior until after the resurrection. Jesus was merciful and patient with Jude that whole time which made a big impression on him, so he wrote, "*Be merciful to those who doubt,*" (**Jude 22**) as an important instruction to believers. Let's look at the mercy Jesus showed to one who doubted.

Jesus appeared to the disciples in a locked room. Rather startling, but he said, "*Peace be with you!*" (**John 20:19**) Jesus let them see for themselves that it was him by inspecting his wounds which remained in his glory as the Lamb who was slain and who now lives. Reminds me of that scene in *Hook* when the Lost Boys come up to Peter (Robin Williams) and stretch out his looser adult face skin and discover, "There you are, Peter!" The disciples did that, saw their Jesus, and believed. "*Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you,*" (**John 20:21**) Jesus said. Jesus didn't itemize what they did wrong, he put them at peace, and sent them equipped with the Holy Spirit as his messengers sharing the good news of peace and life in him.

A rad experience missed by Thomas. He heard about it, but wanted the same opportunity, "*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.*" (**John 20:25b**) A week later, Jesus appeared saying, "*Peace be with you!*" (**John 20:26b**) and gave Thomas the chance to inspect his hands and side. Is this Jesus being indulgent? No, because indulgence isn't the correct concept through which to view this interaction. This isn't Jesus caving to the skepticism of someone who could have read what happened in the Jerusalem Times, or just listen to his 10 eyewitness friends. This is Jesus giving Thomas what Thomas needs, so Jesus gives Thomas patience, love, and mercy to bring him into a securely attached relationship with his God. "Believe," said Jesus.

Thomas said, "*My Lord and my God!*" (**John 20:28**) which isn't reluctant acquiescence when proved wrong. This is the reaction of someone who loves Jesus and who watched his Lord die and who now sees him alive. This is faith! Cool for the other guys also. Can you imagine the excited glances by Simon, Philip, Levi, and James?? Much happy, "You see, man??!! That's what we were saying!!! Not in the room – in the room!! What?!"

We weren't there. We've not had the opportunity to investigate Jesus in a tactile manner. Because we are material people who live in the material world, we crave that, crave what's verifiable to our senses. But since we haven't had the chance and because we're people, we doubt. Doubt wants proof. Proof would be nice, but Jesus doesn't give the kind we think we need. He gives mercy, patience, and assurance of peace now and life eternal based on his own work of dying and rising in the Word. Those are proofs of faith, real and precious, yes, but until we're in glory with arms embracing Jesus, we'll be walking the tightrope of belief and doubt. We do with this blessing, "*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet*

have believed.” (John 20:29) That’s us! We believe even though we haven’t seen him and are filled with inexpressible joy.

Now, if I still doubt, does this make me a doubting Joe? Sure, sometimes, but let’s not label me as such because it’s an inaccurate overgeneralization and I’d just prefer it if you didn’t! I’m confident you don’t want that either. Why, then, refer to Thomas this way when we also know this about him: **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.’*” and **John 14:5**, “*Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?*” This is what concern and dedicated love look like.

If we often think of Thomas diminutively but then venerate him with titles of “saint” and “apostle,” in what light will we think of those without such honorifics? In other words, what do we think of the Joe Schmos, who desire proofs for the right reasons and doubt for all the relatable reasons? Do we look down on them? Yes. If you’re defensively thinking, “Oh, no I don’t!” or if this makes you bristle, I encourage you to continue listening because if that chord is struck, it’s God doing the striking and heed should be taken because the manner in which we view others, mercifully or judgmentally, will cause our witness to thrive or suffer.

Instead of characterizing people as those with a “weak” faith or diagnosing them with chronic doubt and then, even if ever so subtly, treating them in a frustrated or merciless way, instead of that, be like Jesus. What did Jesus do here? He put people at peace that because he lives, sin’s gone and heaven’s open! He showed us that God loves people so much, wants us to be his partners. He wants us to check him out, take the time and care to see him, learn of him and his love, and from his love to love him too! Jesus gave Thomas that chance. I don’t know how long it took. He could have knelt at Jesus’ side holding his hands in awe and crying the big salty tears of one overwhelmed by happiness and relief.

Be merciful to those who doubt, for you yourself doubt. What’s it look like for us to give someone else with doubts the grace and space to experience the living Lord Jesus’ love for them and have love wash over doubt? Do we give people that time? Do we create an atmosphere where it’s safe to wonder aloud and express doubts no matter how uncouth or taboo? Am I comfortable expressing them? Not all of them! If you’re thinking the same, let’s make that change. I guarantee we’ll all be and feel better, more authentic and real, and more encouraged when we acknowledge and talk about this instead of pretending it doesn’t exist. Creating this atmosphere likely means being the first to open up and say, “Hey, I’m not so sure about this. Got a few minutes?” It means caring less how that’ll be received, putting it out there, and then listening when people voice doubt without diminishing or dismissing. Why not? Well, that’s super rude and invalidating and Jesus didn’t! From Jesus we see, “Here, Thomas, my man. Put your hand here. It’s ok. No, it won’t hurt. Yes, it’s really me.” Be with people as they take the time to do that investigation, support them, pray with them, and rejoice with them.

Jesus did many other miracles than this, but we don’t know them. We don’t need to because we do know that Jesus went willingly to the cross and there died to pay for sin, a miracle, and that he rose to life as our life, a miracle that gives peace and salvation. “*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.*” (**John 20:31**) You are blessed to believe. You are blessed to have life in Jesus’ name. Amen.