

the Word

by Suzanne Guthrie

HHEY YOU! Don't even *think* of parking that sermon near this playground! Take your Doubting-Thomas-Mobile to some other lot. Don't even wait here with your motor running.

OK—maybe it sounds like I don't have a life. But Bible people are real to me. And my relationships with them change as I mature, just as you come to appreciate relatives at family reunions. The stuffy aunt who once shooed you away from the dessert table before lunch reveals that she backpacked across Mongolia. The boring old uncle who wouldn't play croquet with you is not only a particle physicist but possesses an ever-flowing fountain of dry wit. The distant cousin who delighted you playing "Happy Birthday" at a party is now a world-class jazz musician.

As a child I might have stared at Cousin Thomas after some aunt whispered to another aunt that he was a "doubter." By the tone of their voices, I knew I didn't want to be one. Nevertheless, in spite of best intentions, you grow up to be a doubter. And Cousin Thomas becomes your hero.

Here's how I came to know the real Cousin Thomas.

A message that Lazarus is sick unto death comes to Jesus and the disciples. While Jesus prevaricates noisily, *I won't go to Lazarus, OK, it's two days, now I'll go to Lazarus, Lazarus has fallen asleep, no, I mean he's dead*, the disciples try to persuade him not to venture near Jerusalem. "Rabbi, the Jews were but now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?" (John 11:8).

Thomas, with piercing resignation, says, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." *After that, what are the others going to do? Slip off into the desert? Skulk away up to Galilee?*

Again, during the last discourse, the incisive Thomas inspires. Jesus, carried away metaphor by beautiful metaphor, offers eternal hope in the mansions prepared by him.

"Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way where I am going" (John 14:1-4).

Wait a minute, Thomas interrupts. Maybe the disciples were falling asleep already. *We don't know where you are going. So how can we know the way?*

The discourse shifts. Jesus replies frankly. "I am the way," says Jesus (John 14:6). *I am the way, the truth, the life.*

If Cousin Thomas had not already become my hero in these two scenes, at the very least they set the stage for the moment he does become my hero. Like Thomas, I was absent when Jesus breathed on the disciples. I was missing from the line-up when the faith gene was distributed. (What *do* those believing Christians have that I don't?)

Like Thomas, I want truth. I don't want a faith of smoke and mirrors. I know that a faith even slightly off trajectory eventually veers far off the mark. Faced with my own tardiness, depending upon second-hand accounts, whom will I believe? Imagine what Thomas is thinking when Simon Peter declares, "We have seen the Lord!"

You have seen the Lord, Mr. Simon Let's-build-three-booths Peter?

You have seen the Lord, Mr. Simon God-forbid-Lord-This-shall-never-happen-to-you Peter?

You have seen the Lord, Mr. Simon You-shall-never-wash-my-feet-Not-my-feet-only-but-also-my-hands-and-my-head Peter?

You have seen the Lord, Mr. Simon I'll-never-deny-thee-deny-thee-deny-thee Peter?

Family-picnic-wise, who would I believe? My own mother? (pause).

Nope. My brother? (long pause).

Nope. My children? (even longer

pause). Nope. Cousin Thomas? Cousin Thomas who said, "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe"? Yes!

For 11th-hour laborers and others who are slow-of-heart, Thomas's caution makes him a more credible witness. Furthermore, after the invitation to touch the wounds of Jesus, he penetrates even beyond the superficial excitement of the moment. It is Cousin Thomas who delivers the punch line that kicks off the next 2,000 years of professional Christology. "My Lord and my God!" The beatitude that follows is not meant as a whack at Thomas, the doubter. Rather, Jesus encourages those of us who did not witness these events for ourselves to discover the truth alone in the prayer room, or in struggles for justice, by serving the weak, by worshiping in spirit and in truth, or by schmoozing with the Bible people at family reunions.

Late have I loved you, beauty so ancient and so fresh. Late have I loved you. Behold, you were within and I was outside, and I was seeking you there. I, deformed, was pursuing you in the beautifully formed things that you made. You were with me, but I was not with you. Those things held me far away from you, things that would not exist if they were not in you. You called and clamored and shattered my deafness; you flashed and gleamed and banished my blindness; you were fragrant and I drew in breath and now pant for you. I tasted and now I hunger and thirst for you; you touched me and I have been set ablaze with longing for your peace. (St. Augustine, *Confessions* [10:38], translated by Scott MacDonald)

Sunday, April 3

John 20:19-31

Cousin Thomas



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