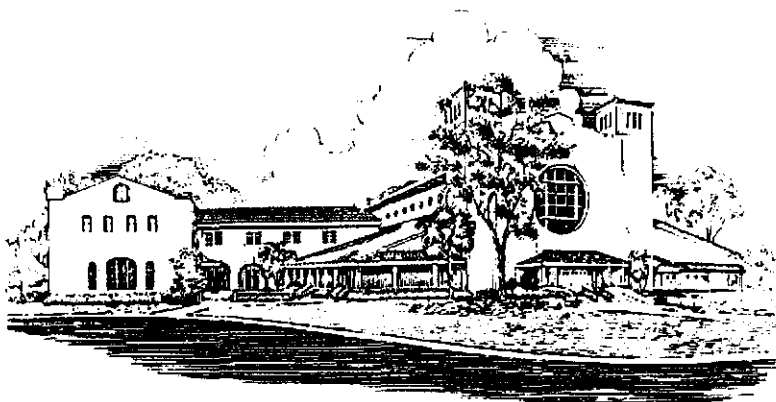


# First Church Pulpit

**"THOMAS, AND HIS DOUBTS..."**

**Text:** "Thomas said to them, 'Unless I see the scars of the nails in his hands... I will not believe.'"

— (John 20:25)



## FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

401 SOUTHEAST FIFTEENTH AVENUE  
FORT LAUDERDALE, FLORIDA 33301

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RICHARD M. CROMIE, Minister

I have one simple objective in this sermon: to tell you most of what I know, and some of what I feel about the New Testament disciple named Thomas. Following that I have one single goal: to encourage you to love him, and to follow alongside of him, as he follows Jesus. Some years ago, I published the book of Easter Sermons, and one of them was entitled "Thomas is a Friend of Mine". He was then, and he still is now. Mostly we separate people into groups: the good guys and the bad guys, the pious here, the "petty" over there. These are the believers, and those are the doubters. But the Bible seldom does it that way. The Bible knows there is a little bit of Thomas in them all. As Carl Jung once said: "All things cast a shadow", even our belief. Thomas was the one who expressed his doubts about the resurrection. He had other reservations, too. There is a little touch of Thomas in us all.

For one thing, I always have had a deep reservation about folks who ooze their religion all over me, all the time. I suspect those who pretend to know everything, and who try to close every conversation saying: "Well, the Bible says it's true." The bible does at times; but many times the Bible does not say it as clearly as the one who is saying it to me.

Let me tell you very quickly what the Bible says about Thomas. The first time you read his name, it is in the repeated listing of the twelve disciples. Thomas is on every list. Some of you will know that The Twelve are called by different

names. It is difficult to try to reconcile the lists, but they are writing from memory, about twenty years later. I couldn't name twelve names of my high school classmates, no matter how hard I tried. I could name the president of the class. I could name a girl or two. I could name a few others, including my sister. The first time you meet Thomas, he is just one of the twelve.

Then, as the life of Jesus and the twelve unfolds, Thomas was in the background almost all the way, until things begin to matter. His ego needs were met by being Thomas. He did not need to parade around or brag, and get into the center of everything. He just kept on keeping on, faithfully in the background. You know people like that, don't you? I know some people who talk all the time. You could wrap up all their conversation in a paper bag, and throw it out the window.

But I know others, and you do too, who seem to sense what is important. When they speak, I listen. They normally only say it once. They only give you what you ask for. I think Thomas was like that. Almost everything we know about what he did comes in the last week of Jesus's life. When things began to matter, there came Thomas to the fore.

By the way, the Bible tells you that he was a twin. My father was an identical twin. He and my Uncle Howard used to fool us when we were children. And Pastor Harberts in this congregation is a twin. He helped me understand that

instant identification one would have. It is a pity the Bible does not tell you who was Thomas's twin. There is no mention of him anywhere. By the way, one tradition says the twin was a girl. But he had to be drawn away from his twin to devote himself to Jesus. Being a twin has a lot to do with loyalty.

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The second mention of Thomas comes when Lazarus was ill, and about to die. Lazarus was up in Bethany, which is just outside Jerusalem, at the top of the Mount of Olives. This was forbidden country now, because Jesus had been warned not to return. He knew that if he went to Bethany, even to visit Lazarus, the authorities would arrest him instantly and stone him to death. It had to do with his so-called "heresy". When the news came to Jesus that one he loved, named Lazarus, was ill unto death, Jesus took two days to think about it. ... Should I really go up there? He could have healed him from afar. He did not have to go to that dangerous country. The disciples, to a man, said: "Don't go, Lord. It is not worth it."

I said, "to a man"; excuse me, one did not, Thomas. He said: "Go, Lord, and we will all go with you to die together." That took courage! That is loyalty, to lay down your life for your friend! (Now, he did not do it...pity. He, too, deserted in the end.) But, it tells you a lot about Thomas.

I was out last night, relaxing as the

Fort Lauderdale Baseball Yankees played the St. Petersburg Cardinals. It is a lot of fun, spending a Saturday night watching people hit baseballs. But in the middle of the game, the Cardinal pitcher threw at the head of a Yankee batter, a big brute. With a bat in hand, out he went to the mound. I was sure he was going to murder the pitcher. Everybody came off the benches...but one little fellow, the catcher, tore right after him. He got hurt, tackling this big fellow. But he knocked him down. "I'll do anything to protect him."

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"We'll go and die with him." You see, what that really says is that Thomas figured out what was happening before anybody else. He had brains enough to know, as someone who walks in a room and instantly comprehends what is going on. Nietzsche said: "God looks you in the eye and sees everything, and nobody wants to be known that much." For those two days after Jesus died, he was pondering what to do next. On the road to Emmaus it says: "We thought He was the one, but now it is finished."

Thomas has the reputation of being a pessimist. I think he was a perfectionist as well. He could not stand it when other people could not measure up. It is hard, too, being patient with incompetence. He saw it all. It tells you much about the man when he is the one to say so early on "Let's go up and die with him."

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Then, next Thomas appears in John 14, my favorite chapter in the New Testament: "Let not your hearts be troubled", Jesus Christ is speaking, "You believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go, I will come again, and receive you unto myself, that where I am, ye may be also. Wither I go..." It's like hearing the Twenty-Third Psalm for the first time, or having been there when Paul was dictating First Corinthians 13. I mean, Jesus, excuse us, the young people understand me, was "on a roll", offering the greatest Scripture of His life.

And, along comes Thomas, interrupting. To paraphrase: "Lord...I am sorry to interrupt you, but if we do not know where you are going, how can we know the way?"

I mean, it's like having stood at that door Easter Sunday morning, having listened to the beauty of our music; having offered everything about the Gospel of the Resurrection Morning. And, the first few people who came out of the door said: "It was too cold in there today." I whispered, "Glory, Hallelujah, is that all you got from the Easter Service?" And the third man said, "And the light was flickering on the left side." Oh, dear...it was like someone kicked me in the shins...but you know the type, don't you?

Thomas could not help it. He just

had to be negative. Everything he looked at, there was something wrong. He never read Dale Carnegie and he never emphasized the positive. "Lord, how can we ever follow you if we don't know the way?" Jesus was patient. I would have said, (as I said at the door) "Hush now, and go home." (And when I got home, I said things stronger than that, you can be sure.) But I am not Jesus. I don't think that you are, either. The Master said: "Thomas, I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father but by me."

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The fourth appearance of Thomas is one that I have misnamed. It is really a non-appearance. It has to do with the lesson we read in John. Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised up from the dead. And guess who wasn't there... Thomas. I wonder where he went. I wonder how it was that the other ten were there (Judas had gone to heaven, or to hell), but the other ten were together. Where do you think Thomas was? Now, I don't know. Thomas never told me. I don't know where he was, but I think I know.

I think I discovered...I had enough death in our family in the last two years to last me all my life. And I have discovered that grief is a very individual journey. Don't ever try to tell anybody else how to grieve. Don't assume that because you do it this way, I have to do it that way, too. I don't, and I won't. And neither should you.

So, these poor disciples, and you can almost see Thomas looking down his nose at them as they huddled around each other. He went off, as many do, to solve it by himself. Let me tell you how it happened. If he was the kind of man I am trying to explain, the type who never let anybody inside their heart...keep them at a distance, because they are afraid if someone should get in, they would find out what is really there. And nobody wants to be known for fear "That they will not like me anymore". And I think Thomas had a touch of that. Quite reserved, thank you..."I don't need friends, and you know why? Because I don't have friends." That was Thomas, not me. I can handle this alone. Come on, Thomas. You know you can't.

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Then, eight days later came the fifth appearance of Thomas. After the disciples told him: "We have seen the Lord", Thomas said, "No, you didn't, and I will not believe it until I see the prints in his hand and the spear mark in his side." Then eight days later, Jesus came back, and guess who was there this time: Thomas.

Now to help clarify this, assume for a moment that you are not Thomas. Assume that you are Jesus. What would you have done if you entered the room where this disciple, with whom you shared your life has said, "I won't believe until I see the holes in his hands". Well, I don't know about you, but I can guess what I would have done. I would have let him

have it (verbally, I am not a violent man). I would have said, "Thomas, you ingrate! For goodness sakes, who are you to demand belief of me?"

But, Jesus did not do that. And He did not do the other things that I would have done either; or the things I know many of you do when there is conflict: you avoid it. Hope you don't run into the person. Right? Sneak away when you hear the key turning in the door. Other people pout. But Jesus did not go to Simon Peter; He did not go to John, his favorite; He did not go to any of the other eight; He went over to Thomas, and said: "Tom, you need this proof? Go ahead and do it. Touch the holes in my hands." He never touched Him, by the way. But seeing, he said, "My Lord and my God."

That doubt gives him the nickname of "Doubting Thomas". Alexander Maclaren said Thomas was not a doubter at all. He was disappointed. He denied it. And I think there is a little deeper level here psychologically, too. If I understand him, I think he felt left out. It does not tell you what he was muttering under his breath, but I think he was saying something like "You fool. If you hadn't been so selfish and gone off alone; you, too, would have seen the Lord." You don't like to be left out, do you? And, I might add, especially if your best friend had arisen from the dead, and came to see you.

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Then, Jesus had the last word, as Jesus always should. Remember what he said? Thomas said, "My Lord and my God..." Jesus said, "Blessed are you. You believe because you have seen me." But then He added His last beatitude, the one we all must hear just now: "Blessed are you who have not seen and yet believe." Because honestly, what is so good about seeing? I mean, Matthew said that seeing, some of the disciples doubted. Robert Browning added: "If my friend ever came back, I'd think I've seen a ghost." What is so great about seeing? It is believing that matters more. "Blessed are you who have not seen and yet believe."

There is a sequel, just a little wee one. Story says that Thomas went on in the tradition of the Church, to be a great leader. He became a missionary. He went up to Jerusalem, the Acts of Thomas say. It's not in the Bible, that is an apocryphal book, but it could be true. He went up to Jerusalem, where Jesus said: "Go ye into all the world and share the Gospel." And the Acts of Thomas reports how the eleven disciples dividing up the world into which they would go.

Thomas, it says, drew India. He said: "I am never going there." So Jesus came to see him, the tradition says, saying: "Thomas, it's me again." You still have not learned your lesson. (My dad used to say of a friend of his: "He did not have the twenty years of experience. He has one year, twenty times over.") And, poor Thomas, at age

30, I guess, and 40, and 50, 60 (he died at 74), poor Thomas...he was always a little too proud to get it right the first time. A little too scared of himself. But the nicest thing of all to say is that Jesus loves the proud ones, too. Thomas is still a friend of mine, for now and evermore. Amen.