

If you had to compare yourself to one of the disciples who would it be? The Bible doesn't give much information on the disciples characters, but from what we know who are most like? Are you fiery and impetuous like Peter, or more contemplative like John. Perhaps you're a doubter and you relate to Thomas? I have to admit that I'm more like Peter because I can be a little impetuous at times, and I'm lucky that God has blessed me with Mary who's more like John. She takes her time to think before acting and with God's grace I'll learn from her good example, but please don't tell Mary I admitted this!

But the disciple I identify most with is Thomas and there are times when I allow my doubts to cloud my judgment. I have sympathy for Thomas because he's honest about his expectations of Jesus and he tells the other disciples what he's thinking as he hears their testimony of meeting the risen Lord Jesus. Thomas declares that he will need to see for himself because he doubts their account of meeting the risen Christ. Thomas won't just believe because they tell him and wants proof. His honesty is refreshing and he doesn't pretend to the others that he can understand what they have told him, or that he can believe something when he obviously doesn't believe. Thomas doesn't pretend just so he can be seen to fit in with his mates, he's his own man! But he is open to changing his position when confronted by the living Christ.

John's gospel accounts of the post resurrection appearances of Christ differ from the other three gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark and Luke, because John was one of the twelve disciples. John has given us an eye witness account and he informs us that after Christ's crucifixion; one week had passed between the two resurrection appearances of Jesus. The first time Jesus appeared there was no mention of Thomas, but when Jesus appeared for the second time, Thomas was with the others.

John tells us that the disciples were meeting indoors and that the doors were locked. Jesus appeared before them and greeted them with a typical Jewish Eastern salutation, *Peace be with you*' Thomas and the other disciples were meeting behind locked doors in secret because they were terrified of persecution following the crucifixion of Jesus. It is also possible that the reason they continued to meet after the crucifixion was due to pastoral concerns: The disciples loved Jesus and they would have been mourning for Christ and by meeting together in this way, they would have been supporting and caring for each other in their bereavement.

After greeting the disciples Jesus immediately addresses Thomas directly by inviting him to *put your finger here and look at my hands, then stretch out your hand and put it in my side. Stop your doubting and believe.* Thomas responds to Jesus by answering *My Lord and my God.* Thomas had doubted Christ' resurrection and it took a personal invitation to Thomas to touch Jesus' wounds before he could believe. Jesus knows that this is what's required to lead Thomas to accepting the truth of the resurrection.

Through Thomas' initial unwillingness to believe, he'd missed the opportunity to share in the wonderful news of the Lord's resurrection with the other disciples. He didn't believe what the others had told him and Thomas' willingness to believe came with conditions, namely seeing and touching. He would not or could not believe unless he saw for himself. It's interesting to note that although Thomas had doubts and appeared to lack faith, none of the other disciples belittled him for his doubts. Indeed, Jesus responded sympathetically to Thomas.

I expect some of us can relate to Thomas, we can understand his reluctance to believe that Jesus was alive. How can someone who was dead stand before you? It seems impossible to understand. Scientifically speaking, Jesus' resurrection one of the hardest parts of scripture to grasp and many doubt the story today.

Thomas is not alone in his doubts and there have been other Biblical characters that had serious doubts over God's calling or presence: Moses and Isaiah both doubted that God could use them. God had to demonstrate his power to them through miracles! Exodus 4 has Moses doubting that God was calling him lead the Israelites out of exile. God had to demonstrate his power before Moses could believe. God had to turn the staff Moses was holding into a snake, and then turn it back to a stick again. Only then did Moses believe God's call and presence with him.

Isaiah was the prophet who tried to excuse himself from God's service by claiming *I am one of unclean lips*. God sent an Angel to touch Isaiah's lips with a burning coal, which removed Isaiah's guilt. He then heard the voice of the Lord saying: *Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us? Then I said, 'Here am I! Send me.'* Moses and Isaiah; two of the most powerful figures in the Old Testament, both started their ministries racked with self doubt. Thomas was in good company!

Today, our knowledge of science may cause us to doubt that someone who had been three days dead, could rise again and stand in front of us. Just like Thomas, we have our doubts and if we were in Thomas' position we'd probably act exactly like him. We may still doubt even after we had seen Jesus and had been invited to put our hand in his wounds. Our experience tells us that the dead do not appear before us. We are people who tend to rely on what we already know or have experienced to inform the decisions we make. We tend to believe in what our intellect can accept and we don't automatically believe people regardless of how plausible they may appear. But our reliance on past experiences and patterns of thinking can lead us to make mistakes and miss out on opportunities. There is a definite advantage of being able to think outside the normal parameters, to be able to believe in the unexpected.

It's documented that the allies had reports of the holocaust as early as 1942, three years before the end of the world war two. The Polish Resistance and the Jewish Resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto were sending messages to the Allies telling them of the holocaust. We had difficulty in believing that the Nazi's could be systematically eradicating the Jewish race and others. Why could we not believe in the holocaust ? We had no sympathy or respect for the Nazi's, we knew them to be a cruel and merciless enemy and a formidable force. They had flattened many of our cities during the blitz and most people knew of someone who had been killed. And yet we couldn't believe the horrifying news of the death camps of the holocaust. These events were simply too far outside our sphere of thinking to be believable and so we did nothing.

It's reported that prior to the September 11th attacks, the FBI and CIA had warnings that terrorists would use passenger aircraft as human missiles to attack cities in the United States. The US intelligence agencies may have been able to respond to prevent this tragedy, but it's thought that their failure to react was because the reports were just too far-fetched. They doubted the information because it was too far outside their experience! We all have a tendency to rely on our past experience and it seems natural to doubt what we have not experienced or learned about.

Sometimes our understanding learned experience can cause us to doubt ourselves and our abilities. Our doubts lead to a failure to believe in ourselves and in who God has made us. It's possible that Thomas doubted because he did not think he was good enough for Jesus. Our propensity to doubt affects our decision making and it informs our choices, often to the detriment of ourselves and others.

Does doubt also affect our worship as part of the Church and Christian community? The reason I ask this question is because John's gospel records that Thomas moves from a position of expressing doubt, to one of expressing worship.

Thomas had to overcome his doubt over Jesus before he could fully worship him and this raises the question of what it means to worship Jesus and to call him Lord and Saviour while still having doubts? Thankfully, we worship God who allows us to come to Him through our doubts and anxieties. In fact, our doubts can lead us to God; we see that Thomas' honesty led him to a position of devoted acclamation: *Note how quickly Thomas moves from laying down the conditions he's made, needing to see Christ's wounds; to confessing; My Lord and my God!*

Thomas' cry is one of worship straight from his heart. His words express exactly how he felt at that moment, unlike the well thought out conditions he'd made previously. What moved Thomas to make his confession to Jesus, was not what he understood in his head but what was in his heart! We can thank God that His Church is a big enough place for us to be with our doubts and all. God loves us all as individuals; with hearts to worship Him despite our doubts.

We can read in Scripture and know from our own life experience, that God speaks directly into our own personal situations, just as He did with Moses, Isaiah and Thomas and just as He does with us. God gave each of them an experience of Himself that in turn deepened the relationship between them and God. This depth of relationship with God based on honesty, is what led each individual to worship. ***But Worship cannot be taught, so much as caught! It has to be experienced.*** Worship comes from that place within us, when the intimacy, honesty and depth of our relationship with God overwhelms our knowledge. And our sole desire at that express moment in time is to worship God.

We are a worshipping people created in such a way by God, to seek to know Him in our minds and our hearts. With doubts? Yes of course! But can I also leave us with a challenge and I speak to myself first and foremost.

Face your doubts and be open to the unknown of God. Be bold enough to turn to God, and speak the words which give expression to your doubts, and then to be open and allow God to work in your hearts and minds. We are all disciples on a journey of faith, learning all the time and none of us are the complete article. Like Thomas, let's face the doubts with the assurance that God is with us, now and forevermore. **Amen.**

(1834 words)