

## *Easter With Doubt • John 20:24-29*

One thing is for sure—he was a doubter! Although surrounded by others who truly believed, he just could not. Maybe it was his intelligence or his education. He was a thinker who did not easily jump to emotional conclusions. So convinced was Lou Wallace that Jesus Christ never existed that he decided to write a book. Besides being his ticket to fame, he concluded that this would once and for all set truth over the nonsense of the Christian religion. At their home in Indianapolis he told his wife he planned to spend the next several years visiting the libraries of the world doing research to debunk the Jesus myth. It was difficult for his wife to hear this because she was a Christian believer, a member of the Methodist church. Several years into Lou Wallace’s research he had completed the first four chapters of his book, intending it to be a masterpiece, when he struggled with an unexpected conclusion. Here are his own words:

“I was in an uncomfortable position. I had begun to write a book to prove that Jesus Christ had never lived on earth. Now I was face to face with the fact that he was just as historic a personage as Julius Caesar, Mark Antony, Virgil, Dante, and a host of other men who had lived in olden days. I asked myself candidly, ‘If he was a real person (and there was no doubt) was he not then also the Son of God and the Savior of the world?’ Gradually the consciousness grew that, since Jesus Christ was a real person, he probably was the one he claimed to be.

“I fell on my knees to pray for the first time in my life, and I asked God to reveal himself to me, forgive my sins, and help me to become a follower of Christ. Towards morning the light broke into my

soul. I went into my bedroom, woke my wife, and told her that I had received Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.”

Lou Wallace abandoned his research to write another book. It was made into one of the all-time classic movies—*Ben Hur*—a story riddled with references to and belief in Jesus. Lou Wallace moved from Indiana to New Mexico where he was elected to office and went down in history by the title “Governor Wallace”.

By contrast, his biblical predecessor went down in history with a different title—that of “Doubting Thomas”. What a sad title! It would be far better if Thomas were remembered for his faith because in the end Thomas was one of the greatest believers in all of history.

It is true that Thomas’ first view of Easter was through eyes of doubt, but that was only reasonable since there was a lot to believe. Jesus had died, he had been buried, his body had been in the grave for days and now Thomas was being told that Jesus had come back to physical life again. The whole idea of resurrection runs counter to everything we have all experienced for all our lives and through all history. When people die they stay dead—always and everyone!

It was hard to believe then and it is hard to believe now. Logic, reason, experience and tons of empirical evidence run against resurrection. The testimony of a few good friends was not enough to persuade Thomas to believe something he could not imagine to be true. Actually, for two thousand years

Christianity has always been a lot to believe.

All belief requires a combination of facts and faith. Whether you are a scientist in a lab, a citizen on a jury or an investor buying stock you make your decision with a huge amount of faith. You have faith in the lab’s instruments, you have

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faith in the judge's legal instructions and you have faith in your broker's research. But faith normally begins with facts. If there is no factual basis then what you believe may be nothing more than psychotic imagination.

In Thomas' case he had facts, but not enough. In his mind it would take unreasonable faith to jump from the few facts he had to faith in Jesus' Easter resurrection. His request to see Jesus alive and to identify him by his crucifixion wounds was not an expression of belligerence; it was a call for more facts to trigger his faith.

The historian tells us, "*Thomas . . . was not with the disciples when Jesus came.*" He never tells us why Thomas wasn't there. It may have been a matter of timing. Perhaps he was just somewhere else doing something else. Or maybe Thomas had distanced himself from the others because he could not quite take their level of belief and anticipation.

Frankly, it can feel very uncomfortable to hang out with those who seem to easily believe when you don't believe. I see that in the life of the church. Unbelievers attend church events, they build friendships and initially it seems to work fine. But after awhile they either come to personal faith in Jesus or drop out. It is hard to be different.

Belief is usually harder to come by in isolation because those around us tend to influence us. The more we associate with believers the stronger our faith. The less we associate with believers the harder it is for most of us to keep the faith.

There are many things about Thomas that positively impress me but none more than that he wanted to believe. You can sense it in his words. You can almost hear his tone of voice. He wasn't looking for an argument. He wasn't trying to be difficult. He was an honest man with honest questions and genuine doubt. He had thought through what it would take to move him from doubt and unbelief into belief. He said, "*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 it.*" Thomas didn't say it was untrue; he didn't accuse the oth-

ers of making up the resurrection. He just wanted something to put him over the top.

Perhaps you are uncomfortable with the way he stated it. You would be more convinced he was a seeker if he said, "*When 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 believe!*" Yes, I do think that would have sounded better, but I prefer to give him the benefit of the doubt. It is easy to conclude later how we could have said something better.

Please don't think that doubt means disloyalty. Judas was disloyal. Thomas was not. Judas never seemed to have much doubt, only remorse for the results of his disloyalty.

There are some Christians who believe wholeheartedly but behave disloyally. And there are Christians who are absolutely committed to Jesus Christ who struggle with doubts.

In European politics there is an expression that is not so often used in America—"the loyal opposition". This refers to those who may question government policy but never waver in patriotic loyalty. Not that Thomas was opposed to Jesus. He was loyal to Jesus even though he had doubts about the reality of the resurrection.

There is one more angle to explore in the doubting of Thomas and that is the way he was wired. Some of us ask more questions. Some of us are slower to believe. Some of us just think too much. It can be hard for those who believe easily to understand the doubts of those for whom belief is harder to come by.

Thomas was wired to wonder. Belief did not come as easily or as quickly to him as it did to the others. My guess is that he was this way in most areas of life. He probably took years to propose to his wife. He would be a salesman's nightmare because of his lengthy processing before closing a deal.

In the beginning of this section of the Bible Thomas is identified in an unusual way: "*Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord!'*" Thomas was a twin! "Didymus" means "twin"; it is like "ditto". Probably because of this men-

tion he was an identical twin. Identical twins share the same genetic makeup. Probably his twin brother was wired the same way Thomas was. It is possible that when Thomas told his twin about Jesus that the twin had doubts and questions, too.

The way we are is no excuse for unbelief. It merely explains that different people come to faith in Jesus in different ways. Jesus came to Thomas in a special way at a special time to help him to believe. Thomas wanted to believe; Jesus wanted Thomas to believe. Jesus did what needed to be done to draw Thomas to faith. Jesus still does the same for us—he customizes; he reaches out to help us turn doubt into faith.

Doubts have time limits. Doubts are like perishable items at the grocery store. They have limited shelf life. If food gets too far past the expiration date what was good will turn rotten. Neither Thomas nor we can doubt indefinitely.

Given enough time Thomas could have turned into a hardened unbeliever. Jesus gave him a week. John 20:26-27 says,

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”

Jesus gave Thomas additional evidence and an immediate deadline. He offered to show him his crucifixion wounds and then told him to “*Stop doubting and believe.*” Doubt had reached its moment of expiration.

The point for us is clear. Jesus will go to extraordinary measures to help us believe in him. He gave his life for us and wants us to believe in him and his resurrection. But he gives us deadlines. He tells us to stop doubting and start believing.

Did Thomas have all the facts he would ever need? Probably not. Few do. Rarely in any important decision of life do we have all the data we want, and when it comes to belief in Jesus Christ God always leaves room for faith. Jesus wants us to believe in him, not in scientific evidence.

What does it take to actually believe? In Thomas’ case the answer seems obvious—to see and touch Jesus’ crucifixion wounds. But he didn’t do it! At least there is no record that he ever lifted a finger. When it came down to actually touching the evidence he discovered the most amazing

truth of all: Jesus is enough! It was not the evidence that finally tipped Thomas over to faith. It was Jesus himself. When he saw Jesus, when he sensed his love, when he had to decide . . . Thomas believed!

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It is often that way. Those who doubt the most come one day to the point of decision. All the doubts suddenly melt away in the face of a personal encounter with Jesus Christ.

When Thomas crossed the line from doubt to faith he became a fully committed follower of Jesus. His declaration of faith was truly amazing. Thomas called Jesus “*My Lord and my God!*” Normally no Jew would have used either word when speaking to another human being. Both “Lord” and “God” were formal terms reserved for the Supreme Deity, the Lord God of the Universe.

Every Christian should do what Thomas did. Get the facts. Stop doubting and believe. Admit that Jesus not only died on the cross for your sins but that he rose back to life on Easter to give you eternal life. Acknowledge Jesus as your Savior. Acknowledge Jesus as God. Acknowledge Jesus as your Boss. Become a wholehearted follower of Jesus Christ.

Just as Jesus called Thomas to decide, Jesus calls us all to decide. Maybe you've been a doubter for a long time. Step over the line into faith. Maybe you've been "half" a believer. Become a wholehearted believer today. Bow your head right where you are and pray a prayer of faith directly to Jesus. The words can go something like this:

Dear Jesus, I surrender my doubts to you today. I believe in you.

You are my Lord and my God. Starting today and lasting forever I will totally believe in you and do whatever you want me to do. Amen.

That would be a wholehearted commitment. If you prayed that prayer, tell someone. Get your faith on record. Call a friend. Tell a relative. Write a note to me. Put a Post-It Note with today's date on your bedroom mirror. Be like Thomas—remembered for wholehearted faith in Jesus as Lord and God.

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