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the SAVIOUR

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“Redeeming Doubt: Thomas”

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John 20:24-29

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²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” ²⁶ A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” ²⁸ Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹ Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

This sermon is part of a three-part series on the story of the post-resurrection appearances to the disciples. The three sermons are designed to be monologues told from the perspectives of John, Mary Magdalene, and Thomas. As such, this manuscript is only a guide – what is shared in worship will be more free-flowing and improvisational.

I know what they call me: *Doubting Thomas*. As long as I live, that nickname will follow me around. Probably even long after I’m gone, the way the story keeps getting told over and over again. Maybe I’ve earned that. I was “the one who didn’t believe.” It’s sad because that’s all people remember me for. But not everything is as it appears. And sometimes the more stories get told, the more the legends grow, the further they get from the truth. I can’t control that. But whatever you think of me, you should know there’s a lot more to my story than that.

I still remember the day I first met Jesus. Bartholomew came up to me and said, “You need to come and see this guy. There’s something special about him. Come on!” Now, I’d never seen Bartholomew before in my life. I couldn’t figure out why he was talking to me. At first, I thought he’d mistaken me for my brother; we’re twins, so we get that a lot. But then I realized it didn’t matter that he didn’t know me. He was just so excited by what Jesus said that his enthusiasm spilled over and made him want to tell everybody, even complete strangers. Jesus has that effect on people. I went with Bartholomew. I can’t even say why. And when I heard Jesus... my life changed in an instant. He was teaching, but not like other teachers. He didn’t command attention because of his stature or his role. He spoke with *real* authority. I was so compelled that I never left, even though it meant walking away from everything I had known.

I wasn’t alone. Lots of people started following him. Some he invited, like Andrew and Peter, James and John. Others of us – well, we didn’t need to be invited. He was like a magnet drawing everyone to him. It wasn’t just his words or his demeanor. There was an energy, a connection. He was the most fully alive person I’ve ever met. And when he spoke to me, it was like the rest of the world faded into the background and it was only the two of us. I wonder if the others felt that way, too?

It wasn’t just his connection with people. He cast out evil spirits just by speaking to them. A simple touch of his hand was enough to heal people of terrible diseases. Even nature itself obeyed him. One night, Jesus had gone off to pray and sent us ahead by boat to Capernaum. It was one of those nights we have in

Galilee when the weather changes almost without warning. We were well away from the shore when it started to rain. The wind picked up, the waves were tossing us around. The water started lapping over the sides of our boat, and we began to worry we might go down. Then we looked out and saw Jesus *walking on the water*. Really – I saw it with my own eyes. I'm not going to lie: when I saw him, I was scared. It was dark and raining and blowing, and I thought he was some kind of ghost or one of the evil spirits Jesus had cast out coming to get its revenge on us. But then he spoke to us, and we knew it was him. We were glad he was there, though we were still in trouble. But he just walked up to the side of the boat and climbed in, like it was the most ordinary thing in the world to walk across the sea. That wasn't even the craziest part. Once he was in the boat, the weather changed instantly. A gentle breeze, no more rain. The water was like glass. And when we looked out, we were only a dozen yards from the beach at Capernaum. I can't explain any of that. I know it sounds fantastic, but it really happened. Maybe you had to be there to believe it.

With him, every day was a new adventure. We went everywhere together, saw amazing things happen because of his power, and got to hear everything he taught. We all learned a lot from him – though there were times we couldn't follow what he was talking about. Some of the other guys, they'd try to pretend they understood. Or they'd look around as if to say, "Anybody getting this?" But I'm not one to pretend things make sense to me when they don't. I tend to say what I'm thinking, even if it makes me look foolish. Sometimes, I'd just come right out and ask him what he meant. If he thought I was an idiot, he never said so. He would patiently answer my questions, helping me see things in a way I hadn't seen them before. Sometimes, he'd just help me ask better questions.

Jesus had a way of bringing out the best and the worst in people. People who needed healing came to him and he helped them. Some were suffering and had lost hope, and he spoke words of life. But not everyone loved what he said and did, particularly people who benefited from the system and those who thought they had it all figured out. When they argued with him, he turned their questions back on them. And, truth be told, he was really hard on the religious leaders. Once, in Jerusalem, he made the priests so mad that they were about to stone him to death. I don't know how we got away, but I was pretty sure we'd never go back there again.

Which is why we were all so surprised when he announced he was going back to Bethany to see Lazarus. Bethany wasn't far from Jerusalem; close enough for the temple leaders to catch wind we were there and send the guards after him. We knew Jesus and Lazarus were close, and that Lazarus had been sick. Still, it didn't seem worth the risk. Jesus wasn't even in any rush at first, like whatever illness Lazarus had was no big deal. But then he told us Lazarus had died and that he was going to be with Mary and Martha. We tried to talk him out of it because it was too dangerous. He was risking his life going there. But he was determined. Some of us were afraid that if we went along, we might get caught up in whatever trouble he got into, and maybe our lives would be in danger, too. But I knew one thing: I was sticking with Jesus no matter what. I hadn't known what life really was until I was with him. I wasn't going to let him face this alone, even if it meant personal danger. I told the others, "Let's go with him, so we can die with him." And I meant it.

We didn't know how things would turn out, but I'm glad we stayed with him. He raised Lazarus from the dead – something I'd never believe if I hadn't seen it myself. Then, when we went to Jerusalem, we didn't slip quietly in after dark like outlaws. We came in broad daylight. It was like a parade, with people shouting and singing. Jesus was so on fire with his teaching and healing that week, he almost glowed with energy. I thought maybe the controversy had blown over, that he had become so popular then that he would go all the way to the top.

But then we went to the Upper Room for the Passover. He was different that night. He began to wash our feet, which made me really uncomfortable. He was our leader, the one we owed everything to. If anything, *we* should have washed *his* feet. But he was showing us something about leadership that went beyond words.

At the table, when he spoke it was intense and deeply personal. He was quiet, sad. I know now that what he was doing was saying goodbye, giving us guidance we would need after he was gone. He must have seen the effect his words were having on us, because he told us not to be troubled and to keep believing in him. He said he was going away to make a place for us, but that he would come back and bring us to him. I wanted to know where he was going and why he wasn't planning to take us with him. He said we knew how to get where he was going.

"Lord," I said, "we don't know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

He said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. If you want to go to the Father, this is how you get there."

He told us a lot more that night – that we should love each other, that he would send us the Holy Spirit to comfort and guide us. And he prayed for us so intensely. I started to get scared about what he knew that we didn't, and well I should have been, too. That night they arrested him. I know I said I would die with him, but when the guards came, I ran. And I hid. As far as I know, everyone else did, too. But I couldn't stay away. I needed to see. I was careful, covering my face, waiting in the shadows and watching around corners. I saw him when they dragged him into Pilate's headquarters, suffering and bleeding. How they made him carry his cross. I kept waiting for him to *do* something, but he was gentle, almost like a lamb. I wasn't at the foot of the cross, but I could see him from where I was hiding, and I saw him take his last breath. And I wept. Everything I'd hoped, everything I'd dreamed, everything we'd done and could still have done...was gone. It was over. I wanted to give up, but I didn't know how. I could have returned to Galilee, and I thought about it. But something made me stay in Jerusalem. Grief, curiosity, a feeling something was going to happen – I don't know. I just...waited.

On Sunday, when I heard that John was looking for me, I didn't know what to think. Had something happened? Was it a trap? Should I go? I debated for a long time, but decided I had to take a chance. I went to the place where we had been together with Jesus. I could hear excited voices through the door. They didn't *sound* like they were in trouble. They sounded almost...joyful. When I knocked, it got instantly quiet. The door opened just a crack, enough to see my face. Then they threw open the door and pulled me inside.

Everyone started talking all at once. At first, I couldn't understand what they were saying. *Jesus...the tomb... hands...Mary...he breathed on us.* I put up my hands. "Guys, guys. Slow down. What's going on?"

Mary began to tell her story, how she had gone to the tomb and saw that the stone had been moved. How she went to get Peter and John, and that they had seen the empty tomb. Then she said she'd seen Jesus, only she didn't recognize him until he spoke. *Was this some kind of a joke? They sounded like they'd had too much wine, or maybe grief had made them lose their senses. And yet, I have to admit, my pulse began to race.* One by one, the others started to say what had happened just before I arrived. Jesus had appeared, and they all saw him. *What if it was true? We'd seen him raise Lazarus, but who was there to bring him back to life?* They insisted it was really him. He'd even showed them the wounds in his hands and his side.

I wanted to believe. I really did. But you have to understand, being as close to him as I was, investing everything in what we were doing, being so driven, so hopeful, then to see him arrested and dragged out like a

criminal. How he was beaten and tortured and humiliated and executed. You can't unsee those things. People don't come back from that. But then again...what if he really *was* alive?

My heart was torn. When I imagined going through all of that again, it was too much to bear. I didn't want to hope and then have it dashed to pieces again. I trusted the other disciples – I really did. I knew Mary's heart. But I couldn't handle it. They were all looking at me, waiting to see what I would do. I looked at them, their faces so earnest, their eyes so hopeful. Before I even knew what I was saying, I shook my head and said, "No. It can't be. Unless I see him for myself, the marks in his hands and the wound in his side, I won't believe it. I can't." And I left.

I don't know why, but they didn't give up on me. Over the next week, a couple of the guys came to talk with me, trying to encourage me, hoping I'd see it differently. And when we all got together again, they made sure I was with them. I'm so glad they did, because that night Jesus appeared again. Everyone was so excited. Especially me, since I was finally seeing him with my own eyes. And there was no question – it was him. I couldn't explain how, but he was there. Jesus was alive.

Then he looked at me. When his eyes met mine, my heart seemed to melt. Had he known that I had refused to believe, how I had walked out on the others? Was he going to tell me I was no longer worthy of following him? I was afraid. But then, he did the most extraordinary thing. *He smiled at me.* And he spoke my name. "Thomas. I'm so glad to see you. I missed you. It must have been hard for you. Here, touch my hands, where the nails were. Here's the wound in my side. It's okay. See for yourself."

All I could do was fall to my knees. "My Lord and my God," I said. And I cried – tears of joy and tears of shame.

But Jesus took my hand and lifted me up. "Thomas, have you believed because you have seen? Many will believe without seeing, and they will be blessed."

I think about faith differently now. I'm more trusting, more confident. I still have questions and I still have doubts, but I don't feel like a failure when I do. When I think back to that day when Jesus appeared, I remember what he said. He blessed people who could believe without seeing. But he didn't condemn me for needing to see him to really believe. He knew my doubts and my fears, yet he spoke to me and welcomed me. Most people won't ever get the chance to see him face-to-face like I did, and that's why it is so important to be able to believe without seeing. I know that's true, and I do everything I can to keep sharing the stories about him and to help people believe for themselves. And I'll keep doing that as long as I live.

Some of you may have questions you can't answer, doubts about what's real and what isn't. Part of me wishes I could make those doubts disappear. But I also know that, in a way, doubt is an important part of faith. For me, it has been the path that led to deeper faith, a faith that is more honest, more real. If we don't let ourselves ask the hard questions, we can end up with a faith that is too simple, a faith that only pretends to believe. Better to wrestle with the hard questions. Instead of looking for simple answers, maybe look for better questions.

Doubting Thomas? Maybe. But I prefer to think of myself as Honest Thomas, or maybe Hopeful Thomas or Faithful Thomas. Because Jesus met me in my doubt and transformed it. And I know Jesus can meet you in your doubt, too. Blessed are those who do not see but yet come to believe. And blessed are those who believe in the midst of doubt, because the important thing is to keep seeking and asking and knocking. After all, faith is a journey, not a destination.