

## **“Thomas the ‘Truther’”**

### **John 20:19-31**

Who really shot JFK? Were the moon landings real or staged? Did Elvis really die in 1977, or did he fake his death in order to get some privacy? Was Paul McCartney actually replaced by a look-alike when he allegedly died in 1966? Was 9/11 staged by the U.S. government? Is the coronavirus an attack by China on Europe and the U.S.?

Are all these questions crazy?

Americans love a good conspiracy theory.

The recent death of wealthy financier Jeffrey Epstein is a classic example. Epstein was arrested on charges of sex trafficking and committed suicide in prison. But he was also politically connected and may have had significant “dirt” on public officials that could have had a wide-ranging impact on the U.S. government. Conspiracy theorists believe that Epstein didn’t actually commit suicide but was murdered, or at least had help killing himself. It was all done to keep him quiet. A suspicious, public death raises such questions.

Conspiracy theorists have a reputation for being a little nuts, but the truth is that we always need people who are looking for the truth.

When it comes to the most famous death in history, the death of Jesus Christ, conspiracy theories abound, but in the center of the story we see someone who is really trying to get at the truth. And this figure is no outsider but one of Jesus’ own disciples: Thomas, the original “truther.”

The death and resurrection of Jesus have long been the target of conspiracy theorists trying to explain it away. The general tenor of these theories is that the disciples acted in concert to claim that Jesus was alive when he really wasn't; that he died, and the disciples "helped" him become "alive" again.

Why they would do this, seems to be a more elusive question.

Some theorists, for example, speculate that Jesus didn't actually die but just "swooned" on the cross and eventually staggered out of the tomb. There are just a few problems with that theory — namely that the Romans were pretty good at the application of death, and John tells us that Jesus was speared in the side (19:31-37). That would have been a heck of a swoon, and Jesus must have been in really great shape to survive all that — more Superman than Savior!

Others suggest that the disciples took the body of Jesus and hid it (a genuine concern of the chief priests, according to Matthew 28:62-66), and then claimed that he was alive.

Some speculate that the disciples had a mass hallucination of Jesus after his death caused by grief, or that they actually saw a ghost.

Despite 2,000 years of conspiracy theories, disproving the rumor of the resurrection has proven elusive. It seems as though the gospels themselves embed an answer to the conspiracy theorists in the text, and one of the places we see this most clearly is in the apostle John's account.

After the death of Jesus, the disciples are hiding behind locked doors in fear of the Jewish leaders. They have just heard from Mary Magdalene that morning that she had "seen the Lord,"

but they could have easily dismissed her words as fake news (v. 18). Women were not considered reliable witnesses in a court of law in the first century, thus they may have chalked up her claim to hysteria.

But then, suddenly, Jesus appeared among them with the greeting, “Peace be with you” (v. 19). And then he shows them the evidence of the wounds in his hands and side. It’s a strange combination: Jesus is risen in a physical body and yet can also appear through locked doors. It’s clear that this is a different kind of body, but a body, nonetheless. The disciples “rejoiced” after seeing the evidence (v. 20). Mary’s testimony had been vindicated.

All of this happens without the disciple Thomas present.

When the others tell him, “We have seen the Lord” (the same words used by Mary Magdalene), Thomas is rightly skeptical (v. 25). He’s not taking their wild speculation for gospel truth just yet. “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” (v. 25). After all, they had the benefit of seeing the nail marks. Why shouldn’t he?

Thomas may have thought his friends were engaging in their own collective conspiracy theory, and he was out to bust it. We know Thomas was a thinker, a questioner. In 14:5, he pressed Jesus on his statement about where he was going. It wasn’t that Thomas was afraid — after all, in chapter 11, he was prepared to go with Jesus to a dangerous place, even if it meant his own death (11:16). It’s just that he wasn’t going to buy into any kind of fake news. He wouldn’t sell his own life cheaply based on false information or wild speculation.

We often call Thomas a “doubter,” but the truth is that we all need a Thomas in our community, someone who is willing to push back on what, at times, seems to be craziness. Thomas isn’t a doubter so much as a legitimate “truther.” He simply wants the truth, which is something all of us should be seeking. Thomas doesn’t reject the idea of resurrection outright; he simply wants more evidence — *the same evidence the other disciples had apparently received*. He wants to experience the risen Christ for himself.

And then, suddenly, he has the opportunity. The pattern repeats: a locked door, an appearance by Jesus. Jesus seems to know that Thomas had expressed some skepticism and offers the evidence that Thomas was looking for. “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe” (v. 27).

Note that Jesus never refers to Thomas as a doubter. First, keep in mind that the other disciples had the benefit of evidence which they saw with their own eyes — evidence that was not available to Thomas. Second, Thomas’ doubts are not about the resurrection of Jesus, but about the *reports* of the resurrection of Jesus. When he saw Jesus, he had no doubt that Jesus was alive. Third, although Jesus says to Thomas, “Do not doubt but believe,” he is not saying that Thomas has a problem with belief. He’s really saying, “Thomas, it’s me, in the flesh. Don’t doubt. Believe. It’s okay.” And finally, what Jesus says to Thomas in verse 29 applied equally to all of the disciples, not just Thomas. He said, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” *All of the disciples* believed that Jesus was alive *only* because they saw Jesus in the flesh. Like Thomas, they did not believe the reports of Jesus’ resurrection either.

So, you have to ask: *How are the disciples any different than Thomas?* Thomas didn't believe the report of the disciples, and the disciples did not believe the report of the women. They were all doubters, and their doubt was only suspended when they saw Jesus alive with their own eyes.

Thomas responds to Jesus, "My Lord and my God!" (v. 28). It's a confession of faith. Note that John doesn't tell us that Thomas takes Jesus up on his offer and actually touches his wounds. It seems that the presence of Jesus is finally enough for Thomas.

And what John implies, powerfully, is that the presence of Jesus should be enough for us, too. "Have you believed because you have seen me?" says Jesus. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (v. 29). John is speaking to his audience and to future generations like us about the truth of the gospel. He is giving us the evidence and asking us to believe it, but not just on the basis of the evidence itself. He wants us to believe also because the Holy Spirit given to us continues to act as a witness to the resurrection and ongoing presence of Jesus with us.

It's not that the evidence is unimportant and that this is just a leap of faith. Quite the contrary. The evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is quite compelling from a historical perspective.

If you were going to make up a story to impress others in the first century, for example, you wouldn't have a woman as your primary witness.

You wouldn't proclaim that a body had risen from the dead in a Greco-Roman world that devalued the body. The pagans already believed in the immortality of the soul; *that* theory they would've easily bought. But to claim that a dead body was alive again.

And Jews would say that anyone who was crucified was cursed and that resurrection was a distant hope. This message would have been ludicrous in the first-century world, the equivalent of claiming you'd seen a UFO.

And yet there was a large body of people who claimed that the impossible had become possible and despite all kinds of efforts to quiet them, they wouldn't shut up about it.

Charles Colson, who was special counsel and "hatchet man" for President Richard Nixon, was indicted in the Watergate scandal (an actual conspiracy) and went to prison for seven months. While in prison, Colson became a Christian and remarked that it was his own criminal conviction that proved the resurrection to him. He put it like this:

"I know the resurrection is a fact, and Watergate proved it to me. How? Because 12 men testified, they had seen Jesus raised from the dead, then they proclaimed that truth for 40 years, never once denying it. Everyone was beaten, tortured, stoned and put in prison. They would not have endured that if it weren't true. Watergate embroiled 12 of the most powerful men in the world — and they couldn't keep a lie for three weeks. You're telling me 12 apostles could keep a lie for 40 years? Absolutely impossible."

We have the eyewitness testimony of the gospels, the evidence of the early church's growth despite all the factors against it, and the witness of subsequent generations of Christians and martyrs. All attest to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

If it's a conspiracy theory, it's one that has actually stood the test of time and the scrutiny of generations of debunkers.

John wrote his gospel not only to give us evidence *for* Christ, but also to bring us to faith *in* Christ. As he puts it later in the text: "But these things are written so that you might come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (v. 31).

Ultimately, our belief in the resurrection of Jesus is a matter of faith, backed by evidence. When we believe, we begin to see all that God has done, all that God has made possible through the resurrection of Christ from the dead.

And when we live out that belief, it's then that we become living examples, proving that the gospel is more than a theory. It's a way of life and the way to life!

May the peace of God . . .

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