

St. Thomas the Apostle

FIRST CENTURY
APOSTLE AND MARTYR
FEAST DAY: JULY 3

MANY PEOPLE HAVE SAID, or thought, something like this, “If only I could have lived when Jesus walked the earth! It’s so hard to believe, but if I had known him, walked with him, heard him speak, I wouldn’t have any trouble believing he is God!” St. Thomas seems made to order to disprove this fantasy.

Little of St. Thomas’ origins is known. He was a twin, and he, like nearly all the apostles, came from Galilee. But his place of birth, his age when he met Jesus, and how he met Jesus were not recorded. His name is in every list of the apostles, usually right next to St. Matthew’s, so he may have joined the band early. He remained a faithful disciple of Jesus even when most left him following his “bread of life” discourse (see Jn 6:66-71).

It is only at the Last Supper the evening before Jesus died that Thomas becomes more than a name in a list. Jesus had told the apostles that he was leaving to prepare a place for them, but would come again and take them to himself (see Jn 14:1-4). He concluded by telling them: “*And you know the way where I am going*” (Jn 14:4). Thomas’ reaction was one of bewilderment: “*Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?*” (Jn 14:5), to which Jesus responded: “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me*” (Jn 14:6). Those months, perhaps years, Thomas had spent with Jesus had, amazingly, given him no clear insight into who Jesus really was.

Even more telling is Thomas’ reaction to the news of Jesus’ Resurrection. Jesus had foretold it several times to his disciples. Yet when Thomas was told by his brother apostles on the evening of the Resurrection that they had seen the Lord while Thomas was not with them (perhaps he had taken over Judas’ role as keeper of the purse, and was out purchasing provisions), his reaction was one of complete skepticism: “*Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe*” (Jn 20:25). Jesus allowed him to stew in this skepticism for a full week! How he must have fumed, and argued with the other apostles, who had changed from near-despair to joy (although

they still quaked with fear that they, too, would be caught and crucified).

Then, a week later, Jesus again appeared to all the apostles, this time including Thomas. He chastised Thomas gently, as a loving God and Master would a particularly uncomprehending student: “*Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing*” (Jn 20:27). Thomas reacted in awe and worship: “*My Lord and my God!*” (Jn 20:28). Then Jesus made the lesson clear, for all those who insist that only the things they can see and touch are real: “*Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe*” (Jn 20:29).

This is not the end of the story. Thomas was privileged to be among the six other disciples who were present when our Lord gave Peter his final commission to be the chief shepherd of his Church (see Jn 21:2-17). From this point on, Sacred Scripture is silent. Yet there is, from the very earliest days, reliable testimony about what happened to St. Thomas. All the apostles were charged by Jesus to “*go into all the world and preach the gospel*” (Mk 16:15). And they did, scattering for the most part beyond the borders of the Roman Empire. Thomas went perhaps farther than any of them, first to Parthia in the Indus river valley (modern Pakistan), and then even farther, to the Malabar Coast of southwestern India, establishing churches all along his route. His final destination was what is now the state of Kerala in India, already on the sea trade route with the Roman Empire, where he arrived, it is reckoned, in about 52 AD. There, over a period of a decade and a half until his martyrdom, he planted a Christian community that survived for over *sixteen hundred years* (Portuguese traders arrived only in 1698), for the most part without contact with the rest of Christendom, with few doctrinal problems or unusual practices. The vast majority of “Thomas Christians” today are in full communion with the Church, a testament beyond compare to the ability of this initially “just the facts” apostle to transmit his hard-won faith to those who had never seen the Lord, but received and kept the faith with the utmost tenacity — truly among those most blessed by God.

