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## *The Courage of Thomas Again*

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**A Sermon by the Very Reverend Sam G. Candler**  
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**Atlanta, Georgia**

### **The Second Sunday of Easter**

"What last Sunday was only a rumor, subject to doubt and disbelief, we have now come to see with our own eyes, touch with our own hands, and believe beyond a shadow of a doubt: Barack Obama was born in Hawaii."

I must give credit for those lines to my old friend, Dan Saperstein. He was actually my college roommate; and he is now a Presbyterian minister, preaching those very lines somewhere out west today.

Today is the Second Sunday of Easter. And it's time again, once again, to defend the character of Thomas. You remember Thomas, of course! St. Thomas. Doubting Thomas.

For me, I begin the story of Thomas by using this item (I hold up a carpenter's square). Do any of you know what this is? Yes, it is a carpenter's square. My wife laughs when she sees me with this, because I have not had occasion to use one very often. (Though I think I did fix a kitchen drawer yesterday.)

There is nothing like a fine carpenter or skilled artisan, someone who knows how to see a construction project just right, who knows how to think it through, and who then knows how to measure and make it just right.

God has given particular talents to particular people, and these skills can always be used for God's glory. The glory of God is a person who loves to use his or her God-given mind to think things through, to study, and then to build in love.

The carpenter's square is the symbol for one of our Christian saints. Perhaps you've seen other symbols. St. Peter is often depicted with a set of keys. St. Lucy usually has a crown of candles on her head.

But the carpenter's square is usually the sign for Thomas, St. Thomas, "Doubting Thomas" some of us call him. But I think the name "Doubting Thomas" is only half the story. I want to make the claim this morning that Thomas, though he does doubt, is really the Apostle of Courage.

Like most of our knowledge of Jesus' early disciples, our knowledge of Thomas is rather slim. He asks questions in the gospels. "How can we know the way?" he asked one time. In today's famous passage he declares that he will not believe unless he sees the mark of the nails in Jesus' hand and puts his hand in Jesus' side.

For this reason he is known as a doubter, as we all know by now.

The legends of the first three centuries of Christianity claim other things about Thomas' life. These legends cannot be

regarded as completely accurate, but they are fascinating and amusing. Many of the legends appear in an apocryphal book called "The Acts of Thomas."

The claim there is that Jesus appeared to his disciples after the Resurrection and had them draw lots. The lots would determine which country each of them would travel to, in order to spread the gospel. Thomas drew the lot for the country of India, but he resisted. He said he was not healthy enough and no Hebrew could teach the Indians.

So, the legend goes, Jesus sold him to a traveling merchant going back to India. The merchant, apparently, was looking for a skilled carpenter, on behalf of a king in India. Some of the stories say the merchant was looking for a mason, or an architect.

So Thomas went to India, the story goes. Thomas admitted to the king in India that he was indeed a carpenter, and the king ordered Thomas to build a grand palace. He gave Thomas twenty pieces of silver.

But here is where the story gets interesting. Thomas did not use the twenty pieces of silver to build the palace. Instead, the legend goes, Thomas gave the twenty pieces of silver to the poor.

The king returned, he became angry, and he threatened to kill Thomas. But then, the king's brother died and saw a vision of heaven. In heaven, the king's brother saw the real palace in heaven that Thomas' good works had prepared for the king there. When the king's brother returned to earth and told the king, the king repented and was, indeed, converted.

This story is apocryphal. It is not in the Bible. It is a legend. But I rather like it, because it tells something more about the curiosity, the skill, and the journey of St. Thomas.

Thomas did become the patron saint of India. And Thomas is the patron saint of everything from carpenters and masons, to philosophers, to blind people. Yes, if you are blind, Thomas is your patron saint!

But Thomas is also for people who like to use their minds, who are not afraid to doubt, who do not mind using their skills for the glory of God. Seeking and searching and questioning are some of the most important things we do in life!

Thomas was a seeker.

And with that seeking, Thomas built something. It is said that he did build churches, in India and elsewhere. I am sure they were made with excellent, rational, right angles and superb architectural features.

But the legend tells us something else. Thomas built churches and palaces constructed out of concern for the poor. He gave those twenty pieces of silver to the poor; he gave his first money to the poor; and it was that charity which created the churches.

Thomas's sincere searching led him, not only to empirical observation and to rational formulas, but to the poor. In Thomas' search for ultimate truth, he found the ultimate answer not only in rational thought and intellectual exercise.

In fact, Thomas found the truth when Jesus said to him, "Put your hands in my side, and your fingers in the holes in my hands." There, there is where he found the risen Christ -- when he was able to see and touch real wounds and real scars.

Thomas had an inquiring mind, yes, but he ultimately had a concern for people. And when we are concerned with people, we are concerned with the poor, the wounded and the scarred.

Thomas had the courage to touch scars. That is where he found such an ultimate truth that he could declare, "My Lord and My God." That is the only time in the Gospel of John that Jesus is actually called "God." That confession comes from Thomas, the Apostle of Faith.

Thomas had the courage to touch scars and to touch wounds. He touched the places where Christ had been nailed and cut and laid open. He learned that when we touch the wounds of humanity, we have touched Christ.

Thus, Thomas is not the apostle of doubt. He is the patron saint of courage.

It takes courage to seek, and to search. It takes courage to ask the innocent and naïve question. It takes courage to ask the serious and sophisticated question.

And then, it takes even more courage to find spiritual answers by touching the poor. It takes courage to touch wounds. It takes courage to touch the places in the world where the world has been wounded.

In these beautiful resurrection stories that we hear during the Easter season, I rejoice in the way Jesus is made known. In the twentieth chapter of John, Jesus appears in peace. "Peace be with you," are his first words. Jesus appears delivering the Holy Spirit. And Jesus appears with the power of forgiveness which he gives to his disciples.

But Jesus also appears in the inquiring spirit of Thomas. Jesus also appears with the wounds and scars of the poor. When Thomas was able to combine the courage of curiosity with the courage to touch the wounds of Christ, he could declare, in power, "My Lord and My God."

AMEN.

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