

# T H O M A S

SERIES ON MATTHEW VII  
MT ALBERT BAPTIST CHURCH

A SERMON BY STUART MCGREGOR

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“Don’t for a moment think that I have any respect for you Peter.” Thomas spoke with sincere disdain for the other disciple. “You’re a nutter. You are all nutters.” Thomas had a way of being his own person. But right now, it would appear to anyone that he was the sensible one.

“What are we going to do now?” he asked. “I just had a job interview. Think about it dudes, we’re screwed. How does my CV look?”

“Well Thomas, what have you been doing since the end of 28?” “Oh well, I was just doing my thing and this guy comes up to me and says “ follow me” and so I did. He told me fairly soon into it that he was going to save the world. That seemed like a good idea at the time. It turns out that he didn’t and actually just annoyed the wrong sort of people so got hammered to a cross. How’m I doin’ here?”

“Not very well.”

“What about points for spontaneity?” “Try *stupidity*.”

“...loyalty?” “deluded”

“...dedicated?” “too proud to admit you’re wrong.”

“faithful?” “ah, let’s go back to stupid. Mr Thomas, you are what we in the employment game call a Loser. You are stupid, easily manipulated and . . . well to be blunt . . . you are odd.”

“Odd! The bum called me odd! It’s all over, I might as well chop off my legs and become a cripple so I can get some real money when I beg. Jesus is dead and buried. Dead, dead dead. That is the only thing we can be sure of. It’s over people, nothing to see here, move along. Jesus is dead and buried. The only resurrection that is taking place here is with you guys making fanciful claims about him. GET OVER IT!”

Now all the disciples were silent. The room was ten against one. Ten disciples were up until the time Thomas came along, in complete agreement

and were feeling strangely positive. There was a quiet buzz going around the room because they had all seen Jesus alive.

Let's go back to the story briefly. Jesus is nailed to a cross. We won't go into the details here but needless to say he took six hours to die. That's all – some people last up to 48 hours. They put a spear into the side of his flesh just like putting kebabs on a BBQ spit and watched fluid and blood pour out. As the roman soldiers took the cross down Jesus' body would have kind of moved in the same way that a jelly might move on a plate being carried from the kitchen to the dining table. They would have simply ripped his hands from the cross with a quick yank that would leave the nail still stuck in the wood and thrown the body on the back of a cart with the two other thieves that were crucified with him.

Joseph of Aramathea watched pained by the disrespect that had been shown by the soldiers. He reached out, against all the purity laws, and closed the eyelids on Jesus' face. It's as though the eyes that once looked on people with compassion and justice and love were in death simply too lifeless. Closing the eyelids seemed to be closure because with the death of Jesus, was the death of a new type of subversion, the death of hope, the death of the power of God. With the death of Jesus was the loss of any hope that the kingdom of heaven would ever come.

Yep, Jesus was dead alright. And off they carted him to be buried. The soldiers dumped the body on the ground outside the tomb and moved on without a single thought for who it was that they had just killed.

Many of the disciples watched all this from a distance. The next day they decided to have a meeting. They had all slept the night after the crucifixion because they had been exhausted by the whole deal. They had cried and cried and cried. The sides of their noses were red from where they were raw from wiping away all the mucus.

[PAUSE: Just for a moment think of where you feel God has let you down. Where he hasn't demonstrated power, where he hasn't stepped in and saved you. Give voice in your heart for that cry to be heard. If you don't relate to that disappointment then use this time to pray for the others who do.

Write them down on a piece of paper and roll in up into a cylinder. We will come back to these shortly.]

A week had past and the disciples were meeting regularly. Thomas hadn't been at any of the meetings because he wouldn't have a bar of their

supposed sightings of Jesus. He wanted to stop the madness before things got out of hand.

Thomas continued. “Do you think that there is Godly power here? It’s incredible that you have all had the delusions of thinking you’ve seen Jesus . . .”

“Would you shut up for a moment Thomas.” Shouted Peter. “I saw an empty tomb. And I saw, I saw the cloth he was wrapped up in neatly folded where his head should have been. He rose from the dead and showed himself to me. Others have held long conversations with him, or eaten meals with him. This is not fanciful Thomas. This is reality.”

Thomas stopped in his tracks and looked around the room. The men who had gathered had bewildered and confused looks on their faces. They all looked like they were pendulums swinging to and fro between what they thought ought to be and what they knew was. Jesus was dead, now he is alive. And this reversal of nature didn’t seem to be easily dismissed for some reason.

At times they would think about their encounter with Jesus a week ago in that same room. They had locked the doors and it was just the ten of them. And Jesus somehow managed to appear to them and he breathed on them the holy spirit. And they were so happy. Everything seemed like it was going to be ok. And slowly but surely they started to wonder if that was just a dream, or some kind of group hallucination. And their reason tried its hardest to find a plausible work-around to this. Their experience of history and of life had been jarred completely by this visit from Jesus—just like old times they thought.

They considered how Lazarus had been resurrected by Jesus command after four days in the tomb. They had been astonished then but for some reason the fact that they had actually *watched* Jesus perform this miracle made it different and easier to accept into reality. But they hadn’t heard of this one before. Death was final. A dead body cannot speak words unto itself. It cannot tell itself to get up and rise.

Their understanding of the cycle of life was being radically challenged. Suddenly they were seeing the power of God working from outside their world. Suddenly they were seeing for themselves some of the miraculous experience that Moses and Elijah and other great prophets had had. Suddenly their preconceived ideas about how their relationship with God worked were undermined, because God had breathed life into a dead body. Just like at the beginning of time, when Adam was nothing but dust, God breathed life into Jesus.

So they would oscillate between reason and wonder, between impossible and miracle, between human and divine, between pragmatism and faith.

Thomas looked at their faces that uneasily betrayed the extremes of faith and disbelief. He looked at them all and pitied them.

“Look at you guys. You’re so worried and confused. Why can’t you let it go? Why can’t you take a good look at where you are right now. You have nothing to believe in so you scramble for anything that might give you hope. You’re collecting eye witness accounts from people who are in mourning, no, more than that, these people aren’t just grieving the loss of a friend or family member, they are grieving the loss of meaning. That’s why they’re seeing things.

“I am upset too. Don’t you understand that? I’m not being deliberately sour, but I just want us to grieve the appropriate things. Give yourselves some space. Let it go.”

But the pendulums kept swinging. Because even though Thomas was speaking words of truth, the absolute reality of their varying experiences of Jesus was too profound, too difficult to dismiss. And this kind of reality is what faith is built upon.

An eerie silence descended upon the eleven disciples in that room. Peter stared at Thomas with a mixture of anger and sympathy. Angry because Thomas was being such an idiot and sympathy because he could understand why Thomas felt that way. Peter himself felt that way when the woman came and told him that the tomb was empty. He got up and took Thomas aside.

“What are you going to do Thomas?”

“I don’t know, I can see that you aren’t listening to me. And that challenges me deeply. I know what you think of Jesus, because I believe in his power too. But as for him being raised from the dead well all I can say is that I believe that he can, but I don’t believe he will. That seems to be the way with God don’t you think? That’s our history. Going from struggle to struggle. And God watches and doesn’t seem to interfere. He doesn’t ever do anything Peter, he doesn’t. You know how I struggle so much with my sin. You know how much I fall apart every time I stumble. Why didn’t Jesus demonstrate his power to me by taking away my temptation? Why couldn’t he perform a miracle on my heart? Why didn’t he Peter?”

“I’ve never been really sick or had anything physically wrong with me. And we saw Jesus heal people left right and centre. He threw demons out of other people, but not me. Not me Peter.

“And every time I saw him heal someone else it tore me apart. I wanted to rejoice but I’ve been so jealous and so wanting. Peter, he ignored me.

I am not going to play your game until I see this Jesus myself with my own eyes. Until I touch him and feel his scars.”

As he was saying this he saw the bolts on the door lift up all by themselves and unlock. His eyes widened because that is a strange thing to witness. What was even stranger was how Jesus walked through the open door.

The disciples welcomed him in a very normal way and asked him to sit with them. All the while they kept throwing darting “I told you so” glances at Thomas. They were joking around and stuff when Thomas came out of the shadows with Peter.

He walked up to Jesus, close enough to be connected but far enough not to be acquainted.

“Hello Thomas,” said Jesus with a wry smile on his face. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.” The other disciples laughed with familiarity because this was the same joke he used on them their first time.

Thomas recoiled. He was truly astonished to see Jesus standing there before him in the flesh. It couldn’t be possible. It wasn’t right. How could he get on with living when this has just happened. He had been scrambling around for the last week trying to stitch back together his life that was in tatters and just when things were just coming right Jesus appears. Jesus. And then Thomas became angry because Jesus was the reason his life was in tatters in the first place. He looked at Jesus and said, “I don’t believe in you. I don’t believe that you are here. I refuse to acknowledge that you are real.”

Everything went quiet. Disciples stopped chewing their bread and looked up in amazement. Jesus looked disappointed and Thomas had taken a very careful step back.

“I hate you Jesus, you’ve ruined my life. I gave you everything. Everything. I stood and looked like a fool for you. I talked with you and cried out to you and all you did was listen and smile and be compassionate but you did not save me. You did not step in and save me. Yes, it’s all about me.

“You know how much I struggle. You know and you don’t do anything about it. You raise yourself from the dead, but woopdeedoo, what difference has that made to me right now? What difference has that made to my life right now?”

“You promised that the new kingdom would come, but it hasn’t. You promised you would save us, but you haven’t. You say that you can bring us closer to God, but you haven’t. Part of me was glad when they captured you

because you were a fake. Do you not think that I wasn't this close to calling out Barabbas at your trial? Do you not understand that even a murderer looked good to me compared to a person who made promises they didn't keep? Jesus, you haven't given me life you've taken it away.

"You may be standing there, but it makes no difference to me whether you are dead or alive."

"I will not believe." And every part of Thomas threw itself into these last words. He was exhausted from it all, he had stored this up for months now and it was finally out. And he broke down and wept.

Jesus stood there and existed.

"You are a figment of my imagination, you are something I conjured up, you are not real. Go away. Go away Jesus and be done with it all. Leave me alone."

Existence doesn't depend on belief.

Jesus still stood there and existed. He said nothing—exactly how he said nothing before the court of the high priest. Jesus stood there because he loved Thomas very much.

"Come here Thomas and put your finger in these holes. Feel the scabs that have formed around them. Peel the scabs off and go all the way in. Then, then you can choose not to believe."

Thomas recoiled again. "Why? What purpose is there in that? If there is any doubt in my mind it is not whether you exist, it is whether you are powerful."

"Thomas you will only see power when you acknowledge it."

"But I want to see the power now."

"Thomas, even as I stand here the world is being redeemed . . . there is power if you look beyond yourself. Feel my scars."

And Jesus grabbed Thomas' hand and brought him closer to him. Thomas was still reluctant.

"Dare Thomas, Dare." And he tried,

"This is absurd," Thomas thought to himself, and the pendulum inside him began to swing. "What will it prove? It proves he is God. What if it's a dream? Then why is there blood on your hands. Where is the power? This skin used to be dead man.

Jesus spoke to this man who was battling it out inside himself. "What do you see Thomas? What is it?"

"I don't know . . . Jesus, I don't know. I'm tired and I'm worn out . . . how do you help . . .?"

Jesus bent down and embraced Thomas. “The power of God has forgiven you Thomas. Never again will you have to go to the temple to try and make your sins right. Never. Thomas you are free now. Thomas you are broken. But I will mend it for you. I will bring peace to you. Thomas, look at me, just for one moment look at me. Am I not the only thing that is true? I have never deceived you, your expectations have been misplaced. If I were to stop you being proud, I would have to cut out your brain. If I interfered with the way you are then you would cease to be who you are.

“Don’t lose sight of who you are in my eyes. Thomas, I know your pain, I’ve just been through it. I know you feel lost and deserted, but I will never leave you, even when you push me away, I will never leave you. Love conquers all. God is love, I am love. With love we conquer.”

Thomas stayed in Jesus’ arms for a good while longer as he sobbed his hate away. His brokenness mended in the arms of his loving creator. The stuff that ripped him apart was still there but put into a different perspective. The shallowness of his faith, his rejection of God, his disappointment in Jesus all fell away as he experienced a love so wonderful and so complete that even his biggest sin looked a trifle in comparison.

For the first time he understood forgiveness by God, he understood the love of his creator and he understood the word Grace.

Eventually he closed his eyes and said “Jesus my lord, Jesus my God.”

Jesus looked around the room and included in his comment to Thomas, “you have seen me and have believed, you guys are some of the few who will ever have that privilege in history. From here on people will have to believe without seeing. They are the ones who are even better off than you. Blessed are those who have not seen yet have come to believe.”

[We are now moving into a time of communion and with it is our prayer of confession.

If you wrote anything on your piece of paper bring it to the front and either wrap it in a candle and place it in the bread which is Jesus body or throw it into the wine which is Jesus blood. This signifies placing our fears and doubts, our anger and disappointment with Jesus into his wounds. Stay with it awhile if you want and light a candle.

Jesus is love. With love we will conquer all.

On the night before Jesus was to be taken away to the trial he looked at the disciples in his room and loved them in spite of what he knew they would do to him. And he even gave Judas his betrayer the privilege of partaking in this ritual.

And he took the bread and he broke it knowing that it represented his body. And said:

And he took the wine and he poured it knowing that it represented his blood. And said:

Bless this meal to our body dear Jesus we pray.  
Amen.