

Historic Overview: Thomas, the Apostle

Thomas the Apostle, also called Doubting Thomas or Didymus (meaning "Twin") was one of the Twelve Apostles of Jesus. He is best known for questioning Jesus' resurrection when first told of it, then proclaiming "My Lord and my God" on seeing Jesus in John 20:28. He was perhaps the only Apostle who went outside the Roman Empire to preach the Gospel in India. He is also believed to have crossed the largest area, which includes the Parthian Empire and India.

Thomas speaks in the Gospel of John. In John 11:16, when Lazarus has just died, the apostles don't want to go back to Judea, where Jesus' fellow Jews had attempted to stone him to death. Thomas says bravely: "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

In Thomas' best known appearance in the New Testament, [Jn. 20:24–29] he doubts the resurrection of Jesus and demands to touch Jesus' wounds before being convinced. Caravaggio's painting, *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* depicts this scene. This story is the origin of the term *Doubting Thomas*. After seeing Jesus alive, Thomas exclaimed, "My Lord and my God!"

The second Sunday of Easter is celebrated as the Sunday of Thomas, in commemoration of Thomas' question to Jesus which led him to proclaim, according to Orthodox teaching, two natures of Jesus, both human and divine.

St. Thomas is traditionally believed to have sailed to India in 52AD to spread the Christian faith among the Jews, the Jewish Diaspora present in Kerala at the time. He left Palayoor, India in AD 52 for the southern part of what is now Kerala State, where he established the *Ezharappallikal*, or "Seven and Half Churches."

An early 3rd-century Syriac work known as the *Acts of Thomas* connects the apostle's Indian ministry with two kings, one in the north and the other in the south. According to one of the legends in the *Acts*, Thomas was at first reluctant to accept this mission, but the Lord appeared to him in a night vision and said, "Fear not, Thomas. Go away to India and proclaim the Word, for my grace shall be with you." But the Apostle still demurred, so the Lord overruled the stubborn disciple by ordering circumstances so compelling that he was forced to accompany an Indian merchant, Abbanes, to his native place in northwest India, where he found himself in the service of the Indo-Parthian king, Gondophares. According to the *Acts of Thomas*, the apostle's ministry resulted in many conversions throughout the kingdom, including the king and his brother.

In a document that is called the Gospel of Thomas, a non-canonical work which some scholars believe may actually predate the writing of the Biblical gospels themselves, the opening line claims it is the work of "Didymos Judas Thomas" who has been identified with Thomas. This work was discovered in a Coptic translation in 1945 at the Egyptian village of Nag Hammadi.