



I was thinking about labels recently, and it had me wondering about a football player who has long been remembered because of running the wrong way during a game. I couldn't remember all the information so, of course, I went to Google to search for information. Roy Riegels earned the nickname of *Wrong Way Roy Riegels* (try saying that 4 times quickly!) after the 1929 Rose Bowl, where he recovering a fumble, ran a few yards toward the Georgia Tech goal line, but then he turned and reversed course. Suddenly, he was in the clear, but racing toward his own end zone. One of his own teammates ran him down and tackled him at the 1-yard line before he could score for the other team.

I was surprised to find the Roy Riegels was not the only one to earn such a distinction, as Google also turned up several other players, such as Jim Marshall, defensive end for the Minnesota Vikings for twenty years and recognized as one of the finest defensive lineman of his era. In a game against the San Francisco 49ers on October 25, 1964 Marshall picked up the ball after it was fumbled away by San Francisco's Billy Kilmer. Marshall then ran untouched into the end zone. Unfortunately, he had become disoriented on the play and ran to the wrong end zone, scoring not for the Vikings, but for the 49ers. Andy Farkas of Washington did the same in a game against the Detroit Lions, recovering a fumble and running it into the wrong end zone.

But Google didn't stop there with the stories of wrong way adventures. It also returned information about Douglas Corrigan, who, in July of 1938, thought he was flying from Brooklyn to Long Beach, California, but it turned out he landed in, of all places Ireland, earning him the nickname of *Wrong Way Corrigan*.

So here's a question – is it fair to remember a person for one event in their life? Should their life and memory be defined by that one event? Whether or not it's fair, that's what we do. And my next question is, *why do we do this to people?* Why do we, for instance, use the name of Scrooge as an insult when, in fact, it is a name that could and should be associated with positive change and generosity?

What do you know about the disciples Thomas? The Scriptures don't tell us much about him, but he is generally known by a single event. What is it? *Doubting* (John 20:24-29 – **24** Now Thomas (also known as Didymus, one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. **25** So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." **26** A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" **27** Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." **28** Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" **29** Then Jesus told him, "Because you have

seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”).

To be fair, the other disciples didn't believe at first either, so is it fair that we attach such a label to Thomas. Luke 24:9-11 says **9** *When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others.* **10** *It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles.* **11** *But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.* (see also Matthew 20:20-28 and Mark 10:35-45). What about *Peter the Denier*, or *James and John the Power-Hungry*? Why, then, do we hang the label of *doubting* on Thomas? It takes one element of the life of Thomas and makes it his defining moment, forever calling him *Doubting Thomas*. That is a really unfortunate nickname, I believe, because there was another side of Thomas that we rarely acknowledge and it's from an event of which most people are not at all aware. We find it in John's gospel, and it comes as Jesus is beginning his journey to Jerusalem. On the way to Jerusalem they will pass through the village of Bethany, where Jesus will raise Lazarus (we talked about Bethany in last week's message, *Reclining At the Table*).

John 11:1-16

1 *Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.*
2 *(This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.)*
3 *So the sisters sent word to Jesus, “Lord, the one you love is sick.”*
4 *When he heard this, Jesus said, “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.”*
5 *Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.*
6 *So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days,*
7 *and then he said to his disciples, “Let us go back to Judea.”*
8 *“But Rabbi,” they said, “a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?”*
9 *Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the daytime will not stumble, for they see by this world’s light.*
10 *It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light.”*
11 *After he had said this, he went on to tell them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.”*
12 *His disciples replied, “Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better.”* **13** *Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.*
14 *So then he told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead,*
15 *and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.”*
16 *Then Thomas (also known as Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”*

I would guess that most people have no idea of this side of Thomas. We are so accustomed to hearing *doubting Thomas* that this better side of Thomas is overlooked. There's so much we can learn from this passage, but in keeping with Thomas I want to mention several lessons –

1. Whatever Label Has Been Put On You, Don't Keep It There.

I have no idea when the nickname of *doubting Thomas* began to be used, but I would imagine it was sometime after the life of Thomas. If it were during his lifetime I would like to think that Thomas would have refused to accept that nickname. I would also like to think that the other disciples would have taken up for him, reminding others that at one point they also disbelieved the news of the

resurrection and had other failings. Peter, for instance, might have said, *I didn't believe at first either. And not only did I not believe, but I also denied Jesus. And not just once, but three times. And not only did I deny Jesus three times, but he heard every word of my denials.* And James and John could have chimed in as well. *It's true; we didn't believe the news of the resurrection at first either. And not only did we not believe, but we had other failings as well. We asked Jesus for preferential treatment in his kingdom, we had the audacity to ask that we could sit at his right and left hand. We didn't understand the nature of his kingdom. We believed it to be a kingdom that would give us earthly power and prestige, failing to understand that it would call us not to power and prestige but to love and service.*

I don't know all the reasons why we label people. I suspect it is at least partially because it allows us to diminish people or groups of whom we don't approve or that we don't like. Or, maybe we want to label them because that label will lessen their voice and their opinion. And I don't know why we allow labels to be placed upon us. I've had some nicknames – which can be another form of a label – that I didn't mind and I've had some that I really didn't like. One of the advantages of moving at different points in my life was to get away from labels and names that had become attached to me. A new home meant a new start and the shedding of labels. The reality is, every one of us has been labeled at some point, but never be afraid to take that label off and say *that label will not define me!*

Jesus gave that courage and ability to many with whom he came into contact. The Samaritan woman at the well in John chapter 4 is a good example of when Jesus ignored a label and gave a person the courage and ability to reject a label. The disciples of Jesus had gone to town to buy food while Jesus sat at the well and spoke with this woman from Samaria. John tells us that, upon their return, the disciples were amazed that Jesus was speaking with this woman, because such a thing was not done.

(1 Now Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that he was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John— 2 although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples. 3 So he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee. 4 Now he had to go through Samaria. 5 So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. 6 Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon. 7 When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" 8 [His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.] 9 The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) 10 Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." 11 "Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? 12 Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?" 13 Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, 14 but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life." 15 The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water." 16 He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back." 17 "I have no husband," she replied. Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. 18 The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true." 19 "Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. 20 Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."

21 "Woman," Jesus replied, "believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. 22 You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. 24 God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth." 25 The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain

everything to us.” **26** Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.” **27** Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, “What do you want?” or “Why are you talking with her?” **28** Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, **29** “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?” **30** They came out of the town and made their way toward him.

The disciples obviously, had put several labels on her, labels that prevented them from speaking to her, but those labels did not prevent Jesus from speaking to her. Those labels, though unspoken, were nonetheless there – *unworthy, lesser, inferior*. But after her conversation with Jesus she went into town and told everyone about their conversation. Obviously, she was excited and energized about one who would speak with her, when the disciples would not, and it told her she was worthy, and she was able to take off the label put on her by others.

The woman taken in adultery in John 8:2-11 is another example (**2** At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. **3** The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group **4** and said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. **5** In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” **6** They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. **7** When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” **8** Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. **9** At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. **10** Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” **11** “No one, sir,” she said. “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”). To those who drug her before Jesus she was only a person with a label, but Jesus would not accept that label and removed it from her.

Zacchaeus, in Luke 19:1-10 (**1** Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. **2** A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. **3** He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. **4** So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. **5** When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” **6** So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. **7** All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.” **8** But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.” **9** Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. **10** For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”). Zacchaeus worked as a tax collector for the Romans, so one of the labels he received was certainly that of *traitor*. Other labels placed on him were probably those of *cheat, dishonest, untrustworthy, and unethical*. But Zacchaeus was more than a label to Jesus, and because he was, Zacchaeus was transformed to the point of giving away half of his possessions to the poor and pledging to repay four times the amount to anyone he had defrauded. An there are plenty of other examples as well, but suffice it to say that Jesus removed the labels from people, and gave the courage to cast off the labels others placed upon them.

Too often we carry around with us the ill effect of the labels that others have placed upon us, perhaps 10, 20, 30, 40, or even more years ago. I am now 59 years old and I still drag around the mental, emotional, and spiritual baggage and harm of labels that were hung on me decades ago, and I suspect the same is true for each of you as well. Whatever label it is that has been hung around your neck and has, or is, causing you harm, rip it off and throw it away. Remember this – God did not put it there. If you want a label, allow it to be the kind of label that God would give, such as *child of God, worthy, loved,*

valued, beloved, forgiven. Only accept a label that is going to lift you up rather than tear you down. Only accept a label that is going to remind you that you are loved and valued.

It follows then, that if we do not want to be labeled, we should not label others, so –

2. *Don't Label Others.*

The passage begins with a report to Jesus that Lazarus is near death. Lazarus does die, and two days later Jesus tells his disciples *let us go to Judea again* (verse 2). The disciples were very hesitant about that plan, because the last time Jesus was in the region of Judea there was an attempt to stone him to death (8:59). In verse 8 the disciples are obviously stunned to hear that Jesus wanted to return – *the disciples said to Him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone You; and are You going there again* (verse 8). In verse 12 they try to excuse themselves from the necessity of going by saying that if Lazarus were asleep he would wake up. *The disciples therefore said to Him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover."* Now Jesus had spoken of his death; but they thought that He was speaking of literal sleep (verses 12-13).

Thomas then does something truly amazing. Thomas steps up and makes this proclamation – *Thomas, therefore, who is called Didymus, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him* (verse 16). Listen to that again – *"Let us also go, that we may die with him* (verse 16). This was not Peter, aka *the Rock*. Peter, the one who most often was the first to speak, was silent on this occasion. This was not John, aka *the beloved disciple*, who could have stepped forward to offer a reason why he was so beloved. This was not James or John, the ones who wanted to sit at the right and left hand of Jesus, serving as powerbrokers in his kingdom. No, when it came down to the reality of what it meant to be at his right and left, they stepped back. This was Thomas, one of the disciples of whom we know very little. This was Thomas, the one we call *doubting Thomas*. Do you hear any doubt in his voice? Is there any doubt about his love for Jesus? Is there any doubt about his commitment to Jesus? Is there any doubt in his willingness to go anywhere and do anything that would be required as one of Jesus' closest followers? Doesn't sound like it to me.

The problem with labels and nicknames is that they take one episode or one event and then hang it around a person's neck as though that one event or that one episode defines that person, and that is simply not true. The moment of doubt in Thomas' life, obviously, was not the definitive moment for him. Why do we remember Thomas for his moment of doubt? Why do we not remember and define his life by this moment?

God, obviously, does not label others, so neither should we.

3. *Let Us Challenge One Another To Do Better.*

There is something else very interesting in the last line of today's Scripture text. Did you catch what Thomas said? *"Let us also go, that we may die with him."* Not only is there no doubt and no hesitation, notice that Thomas does not speak in the singular, but in the plural – *let us go also, that we may die with him*. Isn't it nice of Thomas to commit the lives of the others? It's one thing to offer your own life, but the lives of others?

Don't you just love when someone volunteers you for something? *Hey, Dave will be glad to crawl into that really tight space and pull out that really big snake because he's not the least bit claustrophobic and he really, really loves snakes* (for the record, I don't like either!)

What Thomas was doing was challenging the others to do better and to be better. *If Jesus is willing to go to Jerusalem, to risk his life, he is, in essence saying, and we say we are his friends and that we love him, then why don't we go with him?*

In my final year of college I was serving as the youth minister in a small church in Jonesboro, Tennessee. It was about this time of year, just a few weeks out from Easter, and the lesson's text was either this passage or the passage where Jesus speaks of taking up our cross and following him. A man

in the class said that, if necessary, he would give his life for his faith without hesitation. Another member of the class said, *no you wouldn't. You would never do that.* We were all a bit taken back by her boldness of accusation. The man protested that he would indeed give his life for his faith. Once again, the woman challenged him, saying *how would you be willing to die for your faith when you don't even make it to church most Sundays?* He was obviously hurt by her comments, and the disappointment was clearly on his face. I couldn't help but wonder why she had to be so harsh in her assessment of her faith. Who knows if they would actually be willing to give their life for their faith, if necessary? Thank goodness we don't have that worry! But why not be more positive about the man's faith? Why not say, *you know, I believe you would. I believe your faith is that strong.* Why not be encouraging instead of breaking him down? Why not be like Thomas, challenging one another to do better?

When I was in high school one of the students was saddled with some terrible labels. Other students were often vicious and cruel as they hurled the labels at him. We were not close friends, but we were friends, and we attended the same church. Looking back over the years, I would be hard pressed to tell you many of the names of those who labeled and then ridiculed the young man because of the label they attached to him, but I will always remember his name. And I imagine he remembers me; remembering me as someone who did not stand up with him and reject the labels that were placed upon him. I didn't call him any names. I didn't ridicule him. But I also didn't say anything. I could have stood up and said *he's my friend, and I'm not going to treat him like that.* I could have been the one to challenge others to do better, and I will forever regret that I did not do so.

Why do we allow others to label us? Why do we insist on labeling others? That is not the way of Jesus! Let us reject the labels that others want to place upon us and let us reject the temptation to label one another! If there are labels, let them be only the kind of positive, encouraging labels that God would use – *beloved* or *child of God*. Let us encourage one another to do better!