

Encounters with Christ

Part 2: Thomas

John 20:19-31

1. Fear is doubt unanswered.

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Part 2: Thomas

(John 20:19-31)¹

Today we continue in the second of our six-part series looking at the encounters that the disciples had with Jesus from after the resurrection to the day of Pentecost, identifying what they were feeling, and in the process, we'll see that they struggled with some of the same faith issues that we do. Even though we have the advantage of seeing Scripture from the *resurrection side* of Easter, sometimes that makes it difficult for us to connect with the events in the Gospel stories, and that can be especially true when it comes to these events between the resurrection and the Day of Pentecost. You'll see that over the course of those 50 days, the disciples' journeys took them from fear, to faith, to filling with the Holy Spirit. It is a journey that we need to relate to, and need to be on, as we too journey along that continuum from fear to faith to filling.

Maybe since last Sunday when we talked about the two disciples on the dirt road to the village called Emmaus, maybe you've been on a faith-filled walk, and you are fully confident in the risen Jesus, and you are telling everyone about Him. But maybe after last Sunday, you came to Monday and life hit you in the eyes. You found yourself with the same fear, the same wrong thinking, or habits, or addiction, or sin and death. And you wondered where Jesus was when you needed him most – why didn't he come walking alongside you? You trusted him, but then you found that life wasn't treating you differently – on Monday you realized you had the same struggles.

If so, you are probably wondering, "What's going on? Where's Jesus?" That's a good question, and I believe we have an answer to that as we look at another encounter the disciples had with the risen Jesus. So today we are in John 20:19-31. Would you show honor to God's Word and stand with me as I read the main passage for today:

"It was still the first day of the week. That evening, while the disciples were behind closed doors because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them. He said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they were filled with joy. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.' Then he breathed on them and

¹ Primary resources are William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, Rev. and updated, vol. 1, The New Daily Study Bible (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2001), Craig Groeschel, "Doubters Anonymous," <http://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2010/july/doubtersanonymous.html?paging=off>, Joseph Dongell, *John: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Indianapolis, IN: Welsleyan Publishing House, 1997), and *Faithlife Study Bible*, Lexham Press.

said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you don't forgive them, they aren't forgiven.'

Jesus appears to Thomas and the disciples. Thomas, the one called Didymus, one of the Twelve, wasn't with the disciples when Jesus came. The other disciples told him, 'We've seen the Lord!'

But he replied, 'Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, put my finger in the wounds left by the nails, and put my hand into his side, I won't believe.'

After eight days his disciples were again in a house and Thomas was with them. Even though the doors were locked, Jesus entered and stood among them. He said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here. Look at my hands. Put your hand into my side. No more disbelief. Believe!' Thomas responded to Jesus, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus replied, 'Do you believe because you see me? Happy are those who don't see and yet believe.' Then Jesus did many other miraculous signs in his disciples' presence, signs that aren't recorded in this scroll. But these things are written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Christ, God's Son, and that believing, you will have life in his name." (John 20:19-31, ceb)

This is the Word of God for the People of God; thanks be to God! Please be seated.

Today we want to examine the life of perhaps the best-known doubter in the Bible: Jesus' disciple named Thomas.

As you know, Jesus was a very controversial rabbi because he healed people and performed miracles; to the religionists, he was a threat. One day Jesus approached a fisherman named Thomas and invited him to follow him. In Jesus' time it was commonly known that rabbis would go looking for students or disciples. The rabbis would look for the most qualified, most highly educated disciples who had the greatest potential. The rabbis would ask disciples to follow them, and they would train them. Being chosen as a disciple was one of the greatest breaks for a man in this era.

What you need to understand about Thomas is that he was not selected by any of the other "acceptable" rabbis. He probably wasn't "disciple" material. He wasn't educated. He wasn't among the elite. He was rather ordinary. In other words, to be chosen to be a disciple was the break of his lifetime. That's one reason why it wasn't hard for him to leave his family business and everything else behind to follow Jesus. Thomas staked the rest of his life on being a disciple of the rabbi Jesus.

That's also why, when Jesus gave up his life and died on the cross three years later, Thomas wasn't even in the crowd. Before that, he had run away from the scene of Jesus' arrest along with the others. He must have sunk into what surely was a deep depression and no doubt struggled with fear. Remember, Thomas was among the Twelve – he was in Jesus' inner circle. Jesus had just been crucified for treason. Any one of his "officers" or closest followers would likely be next. You'll notice that all of the other disciples gathered together just days after the crucifixion, but Thomas

went AWOL. He was lost. He panicked. His world was spinning, and he didn't know which way was up. That's why many people call him a doubter.

And that is the first thing we are going to see today:

1. Fear is doubt unanswered.

We're going to see that doubt gone on long enough, doubt that doesn't get resolved, when we doubt and we don't have or get answers, it leads to fear. Think about it. Doubt means you are wondering if the thing you have counted on, the thing you believed, the thing you had faith in – doubt is when you begin to wonder if maybe it isn't true. And if that doubt doesn't get resolved, then it can be a very frightening thing, because now you are left wondering what you *can* count on; your hopes are dashed; what is left for you to believe in? Will you have to recreate your whole way of thinking, change your entire world view?

There's a lot of talk among Christians these days about something called "deconstruction." Have you heard about that? Many young people who were born in the church, or who have been in the church for most of their life, are becoming disillusioned. They see so many churches that can't seem to distinguish between their loyalty to God and their loyalty to their political party. They see people in churches being mean and judgmental, not acting in Christlike love to each other. They see some pastors who preach from pulpits on Sundays and live in sin and wealth the rest of the week. They see people using God to get rich while ignoring or judging the poor and the immigrant. They see Christians talk about love but act like racists. Maybe these young people grew up in legalistic rules that strangled all joy and peace. Whatever the reason, they are "deconstructing" the faith that they once held so tightly to. The problem is that in their deconstruction they find so much that can be dismantled that they become afraid and stop construction all together. In the process of deconstruction they abandon reconstruction. What started as doubt turned to fear. In their fear they give up hope.

There's a story from the Bible that shows this process in action. It's when the disciples are out on the Sea of Galilee at night in their fishing boat, without Jesus, and a storm hits them. That's where we'll pick up the story:

Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear.

But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

"Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water."

"Come," he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" (Matthew 14:25-31, niv)

So the disciples are struggling with fear when they see Jesus walking on the water. Peter isn't afraid and thinks his faith is strong enough, so he tells Jesus "Let me come out and walk on the water too!" But as soon as he steps out, he begins to doubt, and he lets his doubt lead to fear, and his faith is quickly deconstructed! He starts to sink in fear.

Listen: don't let your doubt go unanswered; seek answers. Let your doubt drive you to finding faith.

I believe doubt can actually be one of the most effective elements to lead someone to a committed faith. Doubt can actually help us on the journey. So if you woke up on Monday last week and had some doubts about what happened since Sunday, you are in good company and you are on the journey. There's more for you on the road from doubt to fully surrendered faith.

2. Doubt is the *first step* toward faith.

I've told you that I didn't grow up in the church, and didn't start attending until I was in high school. But as I spent more time around people in church, I began to learn there was a rule that doubts were bad; they should be ignored or suppressed, and for sure never talked about. We were not allowed to admit doubts. But if we're honest, sometimes even the most committed Christ followers deal with doubts. Thomas did! In our passage today, all the disciples were gathered together and claiming they had seen Jesus—that he was risen—but Thomas was honest enough to say 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 it."

There were three ways in Greek to say, "I will not believe." Thomas used the strongest of ways: "Unless I can touch him and see him for myself, I *refuse* to believe that he is risen." Thomas was making his statement in the most emphatic of terms, and here's why: because Thomas also knew that if Jesus had truly risen from the dead, then that demanded his full surrender for the rest of his life. But, if Jesus had *not* risen, then his great hopes and dreams were all for naught. He *had* to know the truth for himself. That position earned Thomas a reputation as a great doubter. However, I'm going to argue that if you're wrestling with doubts, that position can be the greatest place to *start* on your sincere journey to toward answers and a committed faith. It is as if Thomas was saying: "This means so much to me that I *must* know for myself. I *need* to see it so I can fully believe it."

The point is, it's okay to doubt if it leads you to seek for a stronger faith. There's a story in the Bible of a man whose son was tormented by something evil that caused him to constantly try to kill himself. He wanted desperately to believe Jesus could heal his son, but he still had doubts. Listen to the story:

Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?" "From childhood," he answered. "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." "If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for one who believes."

Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:21-24, niv)

Guess what? Jesus did, and he healed the boy.

Some of you may be wrestling with similar questions. *Do I believe this whole Christianity thing only because my parents were believers? Am I just a weak person looking for some kind of a crutch?*

Listen – God is not afraid of the hard questions. Even Jesus—from the cross—looked up to heaven when God withdrew his presence, and he cried:

"My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46)

Ask Jesus to help your unbelief. He will!

You know, some people say, "The Bible says it, and I believe it, and that settles it." I really do admire the person with a simple faith like that, but for many of us, we can't be so simplistic. Many of us wonder, *Why? Why should I believe this?* Some people sincerely wonder, *Is Jesus really the only way to God?* That's a fair question and a decent place to start on your journey to real faith. Maybe that's not you; maybe your faith is strong right now. Then the best thing you can do is encourage those who doubt – show compassion to them! You are commanded in the Bible:

"Be merciful to those who doubt." (Jude 22, niv)

If you judge those who doubt, you will only drive them toward fear, not encourage them toward faith! Let's encourage each other, because the road to committed faith often starts with doubts, but...

3. God will grant us discoveries on the journey of faith.

As we sincerely seek Jesus, he will reveal himself to us in new ways. He will answer our doubts, although it might not be exactly the way we want – but he *will* reveal himself to you.

When I was a sophomore in college, I had been a Christian for a little over two years, and I was struggling with some questions and doubts. I wanted to know if Jesus really was the Son of God; if he was truly risen from the dead, because if so, then that event alone demanded the loyalty of my whole life. If he did not rise from the dead, then I might as well do whatever I wanted.

I told you last week I had been studying in a class called "Psychology of Religion." I learned that many cults would get "conversions" in ways that were familiar to the church and my experience. They would often start with young people. They would take them on a retreat, getting them in an unfamiliar environment, getting them to exert lots of energy to get them tired. They would keep them up late at night, making them more susceptible to suggestion. They would use music and an influential, emotional speaker to get the teens to "convert". So I began to wonder, "What was really different about *my* conversion to Christ? Was I simply emotionally influenced, or was there something more?" (By the way, if you do the math, you

probably know the answer I got, since I'm preaching the Gospel to you right now!) But I finally realized, by reasoning and reflecting on all the things that led to the point of decision – those things were more than coincidental for me. Not only was there historical and scientific proof of the resurrection, but looking back I could see the work and timing of God – I realized that what I came to believe was far more than being emotionally influenced; there was *supernatural* involvement by God. And the best proof of God's work was that my life was completely transformed. I was literally a new person with new values and new priorities.

But at the time that I was questioning, I remember talking with friends of mine who were strong Christians and had grown up in the church. I shared with them my questions and doubting. Some of them told me they thought maybe I wasn't saved after all, because I wasn't supposed to doubt. I told them, "Maybe God is taking me on this journey! If God is Truth, what has he got to lose by my doubting?" I came up with this analogy: Here is a picture of a house along a beach hillside. There are many of these along the coast – you've probably seen them or maybe even stayed in them, although this seems a little extreme to me! Let me tell you: if I lived in that house, then everything that's dear to me – my family, my possessions, my memories – would all be supported by those stilts, right? I could lose it all if those stilts were not strong! So let me ask you, if *you* were going to live in that house, wouldn't you go down and make sure those posts would hold you up? I don't care if the builder is your best friend – you would go down and kick those posts and get every assurance you can that those posts are going to support your life. I call these kinds of doubts, "kicking the posts." I'm not trying to kick down the house, like some deconstructionists are. I'm trying to make sure my house can stay up! Big difference.

If you'd kick the posts on your house, why is it any different with our Christianity? Shouldn't it be even *more* important that we do all we can to kick the posts of our faith to make sure it is going to hold us up? What are we afraid of? If our faith *is* True, it's going to hold up; we're not going to be able to knock it down by our puny selves. I believe God is okay with us kicking the posts. After all, he told Isaiah:

"Come now, and let us reason together," says the Lord, "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool." (Isaiah 1:18, nkjv)

God is saying, "Let's talk about this! Ask me your questions and let's reason together and see if I can't save you and transform you like I said I would!"

The Bible tells us in John 20:26-27 that Thomas had not shown up for a week. He was devastated. But then a week after the resurrection, the disciples gathered in the house, and Thomas was with them. The doors were locked, but Jesus appeared among them and said, "Peace be with you!" But it means far more than: 'May you be saved from trouble.' It means: 'May God give you *every good thing*.'² Jesus' greeting was the kindest and most generous Greek greeting anyone could offer. There were actually several layers to this greeting. The phrase literally meant, "all peace—in all

² William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 2, The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY: Edinburgh, 2001), 317.

ways and at all times—be with you.” Jesus gave Thomas the most benevolent greeting possible. He didn't scold him for his doubt; he didn't belittle him; he didn't write him off...nope – he greeted him with love: “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”

Jesus gave Thomas exactly what he needed in order to believe. I believe with all my heart that God will do the same for you. He may not give you what you *want* but he will give you exactly what you *need* so you can move to faith. You might think that God didn't come through for you because you woke up Monday and things weren't magically or immediately changed. That doesn't mean God isn't at work. It just means he's not acting in the way you think he should. And that can be disappointing. It was disappointing to Thomas when Jesus allowed himself to be killed. But God can change your life, even if he doesn't change your circumstances.

When I accepted Christ during my junior year of high school, I prayed with a friend and mentor of mine at the time. And when we finished praying, *I was a different person*. It was a new birth. All of my sins were forgiven, and I knew it inside. All of a sudden, the power of the addictions that gripped my heart were broken. God touched me in a profound way. And then when I doubted and kicked the posts while I was in college, I found that original decision held up – it was still true. My faith was going to be strong enough to hold up everything that was dear and important to me, my life direction, my choices, my marriage, my family, my career, my purpose in this world. And let me tell you, I'm glad, because we've been through some *really* hard stuff that has made me doubt – lots. But God loves me and is still strengthening and growing my faith.

But let me also say this: you can't use “doubting” as an excuse to do what you want. I had another friend in college that had grown up in church, but decided that he “doubted” too, and that became his excuse to go out and sin in all kinds of ways. That's not what we're talking about here; your doubting is only healthy if it comes in the context of genuinely seeking God, because God said:

“If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me.” (Jeremiah 29:13, nlt)

If you're *not* looking for God wholeheartedly, all bets are off; you are simply using doubting as an excuse to keep on sinning. But you *can* choose to seek Christ wholeheartedly. And you can choose a committed faith. Faith doesn't mean you've arrived – not at all. But as you grow, faith will lead you to a place of full surrender to God. You will either trust him with your whole life or you won't...

4. Faith leads to *full surrender*.

In John 20:28, Thomas says to Jesus, “My Lord and my God.” This was a huge statement; for a Jew to make this statement was considered a blasphemy that was punishable by death. But Thomas knew exactly what he was saying, and he got what he needed: *fully surrendered faith*. How do we know? By the way Thomas' life ended. Tradition and history from reliable sources tell us that Thomas became the great evangelizer of India. Thomas helped hundreds if not thousands of people leave

their doubts behind and come to full faith in Christ. Thousands and thousands of others came to faith through those that Thomas led to faith in Christ. Many sources say that Thomas was in India from 52 AD through AD 72 and during that time he founded many churches there. It is commonly accepted that, when a group of non-believers demanded that he deny his faith in Christ, the one-time great doubter claimed, "I will never, ever renounce Christ." Because of his refusal, his opponents grabbed him, tied him down, and asked him again to renounce his faith. Thomas was unwavering. Not a shred of doubt. So his enemies drove a stake up through his body, and he died the death of a martyr for Christ. The doubter turned faithful, fully surrendered, even though it cost him his life. Let me tell you, if your faith doesn't lead you to full surrender, your faith is dead.

Faith leads to full surrender. Just like Thomas, and just like me, your seeming disappointment can be the opportunity for you to become more firm in your faith, to see God work in such a way that not only will you be able to more fully and deeply confess, "My Lord and My God!" but you also will tell others that Jesus is true, because you've experienced it for yourself. Don't stop seeking answers for your doubts. Have faith! Let faith lead you to full surrender. And remember, Jesus will fill you with his Holy Spirit and say to you like he said to Thomas and the other disciples:

"As the Father has sent Me, I also send you." (John 20:21)

The evidence of your fully surrendered faith is that you will go out for Jesus, sharing the Good News of God's love to others, no matter what it costs you, even if it costs you your life.

With everything in me, I believe in the resurrection of God's Son, Jesus Christ. Do you?

Jesus hung out with people like us—sinners. He loved people like us. He said: If you want to have a part of my kingdom, you must first deny yourself; it's no longer about you. Then you take up your cross and you follow me. Doubt unanswered leads to fear, so instead use your doubt to drive you to seek God. Jesus will grant you discoveries and reveal himself to you, leading you to be able to fully surrender.

Prayer

Benediction:

May God himself, the God who makes everything holy and whole, make you holy and whole, put you together—spirit, soul, and body—and keep you fit for the coming of our Master, Jesus Christ. The One who called you is completely dependable. If he said it, he'll do it! (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24, tmt)