

The Gift of Doubt

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John 20:19-29

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The Easter sequence of events is fairly straightforward. Early Sunday morning, Mary Magdalene and the women find the tomb empty. They tell Simon Peter and the other disciples, who are unsure what to make of this news. Then come various encounters with the risen Christ – in the cemetery to Mary Magdalene, on the road to Emmaus to the two disciples, and finally that night behind locked doors to the whole gathering of disciples, minus Thomas. And in each of the gospels, the next detail in the story is that some doubted the miracle of Jesus' resurrection. In Matthew and Mark, this doubting is described in general categories, as in "some believed, while others doubted." In Luke, Jesus challenges the two disciples on the road to Emmaus for being "slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared" (Lk 24:25). And in John, this entire category of disbelief and doubt is wrapped up in the figure of Thomas.

Option 1: Preacher tells congregation "Don't be like Thomas. Doubting, bad; believing, good." And like the sheep in George Orwell's Animal Farm, you're expected to keep repeating that mantra even if the answer it offers is superficial and of little use in the real world. Option 2: Preacher tells congregation "We're all like Thomas. Everyone has doubts in their personal life and their spiritual life. Don't be hard on yourself." And like the studio audience for Dr. Phil or Oprah, we're grateful for the basic affirmation but we haven't gained any wisdom that can sustain us once we head back into the real world. The two choices are either to **demonize** doubt, reinforcing Jesus' own words to Thomas that he should stop doubting and start believing, or to **sanitize** doubt, seeing it as an unavoidable quality of our human condition. But there's a third, more biblical option.

As I've studied John's gospel over the past two weeks, I've been struck by how our modern way of doing church does a disservice to very scriptures that define what it means to be church. Each week we read and reflect on short passages of the bible largely in isolation from the rest of scripture. It's as if we're in a huge IMAX theatre with a screen projecting the biblical drama all around us, yet we huddle on the floor with our heads turned away from the screen to look at one or two photographs a minister lays out before us. In the early days of the church, an entire gospel would be read out loud in one sitting. And so rather than hearing the conversation between Jesus and Thomas in isolation, it would have been heard as simply another part of the ongoing conversation that began in the Upper Room on the night of the Last Supper and continued in that same Upper Room those first Easter evening gatherings.

That larger, ongoing conversation traces a beautiful, graceful arc that we almost never notice because we don't read enough scripture in worship. Start in John chapter 13, in which Jesus washes the disciples' feet, giving them an example of how they should live

their lives. Listen as He gives them a new commandment, to love one another as He has loved them.

And then, surrounded by a disciple who betrays him, another who will deny him, and the rest who simply don't understand him, at the start of John chapter 14, Jesus' very next words were words of peace and faith: "Do not let your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me." Over and over again Jesus said this to all the doubting disciples gathered around him. To Philip, Jesus said, "Believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do, and in fact will do greater works than these" (Jn 14:11-12). Jesus then promises to send them the Holy Spirit, who will teach them everything, and he reminds them of their calling: "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them" (Jn 14:23). Then he tells them once more, "Friends, do not let your hearts be troubled."

Now scholars see John chapter 15-17 as later additions to the gospel, so immediately after the early church would have heard John 14, the story would move on to chapter 18, dipping down through the hard descriptions of Jesus' arrest, crucifixion and burial. But by the time chapter 20 is read, the old familiar themes about faith and belief are picked up again. Peter rushes to the tomb, seeing but likely not fully believing. The beloved disciple, who entered the tomb, saw and believed. Mary Magdalene saw the Lord and became the first preacher of the resurrection story. And then the interrupted conversation from chapter 14 is finally continued. Jesus appears in the upper room. Twice he says, "Peace be with you" – just as earlier he'd said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." Jesus commissions them, "As the father has sent me, so I send you", building on the foot washing example and the commandment to love one another as Christ loved them. Next Jesus breathes on them and sends them out into the world with a new power and tremendous responsibility – to offer forgiveness and yes, even to withhold forgiveness. It is the fulfillment of the promise of chapter 14 that they would receive the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, who would teach them everything. It is also the all-encompassing reality of the Christian faith (Let this mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus) of being called to forgive ourselves and others after the example of Christ.

The dramatic arc from Last Supper words through the darkness of the crucifixion and tomb and back up into the light of Easter resurrection is built upon three key ideas: Do not be afraid; Serve as I have served among you; The Holy Spirit will sustain you always. So what happens next? As much as may wish it were otherwise, doubt enters the drama. All four gospels are honest about this. Despite receiving Christ's comfort, Christ's commissioning and the Holy Counselor, doubt is for some the first response.

But ask yourself: What exactly is being doubted? By focusing on Doubting Thomas in isolation from the rest of the gospel drama, we may think the question of doubt only relates to the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ. We think the key question is: How could one who was dead now be alive? So we focus our energy on analyzing Thomas' demand: Unless I feel his flesh and more importantly the crucifixion scars on his flesh, I

will not believe. In our modern world of scientific minds, Thomas' reaction seems logical and very similar to our own skepticism about religious miracles of all types.

But I don't think that's what is being doubted here. What if saying "I can't believe in Christianity because I cannot accept that Jesus rose up from the dead" is not a real expression of doubt, but rather a cop-out – simply a way to erect a scientific barrier to keep us from dealing with the real question of faith and discipleship revealed by a resurrected Lord? Now I realize those are challenging words in a world that routinely places science and logic far above faith and emotion. But I think it's true. I think it's why Jesus doesn't mince words with Thomas. In effect he says, "Don't hide behind demands for physical proof. Those are a distraction and only serve to avoid the real question about what it means to have true life in relationship with me."

In an interview in *Christianity Today*, singer/songwriter Sara Groves spoke about a time in her life of drastic doubt. It was after the birth of her first son and she felt paralyzed by the fears of raising a child in a scary, risky world. Groves commented: "I'd always told the Lord, "Your will, not mine. Take me, make me, break me." But when Kirby was born, it seemed impossible to say, "Take him, make him, break him." I didn't trust God at that level...I told a girlfriend, "If something happens to Kirby, I don't know if my faith will survive." I realized [then] if I could envision a scenario in which my faith wouldn't survive, then it wasn't surviving now."¹

The "wrong doubt" questions are dismissed in the gospels in a few verses. Those scientific doubts about whether or not we can believe Jesus rose from the dead are dealt with by accounts of Mary Magdalene hanging onto a risen Jesus, the disciples sharing a meal with him, and yes, even of doubting Thomas finally seeing the crucified-yet-risen Lord with his own eyes. Ultimately science-based doubts about Jesus' resurrection are just a distraction away from the real question raised by the Easter miracle. The "real doubt" questions come when we ask ourselves, Can my faith survive any scenario I might imagine? In a world where children do die, where mental illness strikes families unaware, where cancer lurks, poverty and violence and injustice seem to be the dominant dramas on the stage of life, can my faith survive that? For my faith to survive that, it would require believing in a real resurrection, a real manifestation of life-power over death-reality, a true empty tomb in a world already overcrowded with cemeteries and broken dreams. Those are the big questions, the real questions of faith.

It was those questions Christ constantly sought to answer. To a world of army boots, Jesus removed their shoes and washed their feet and then handed the basin and towel to us. To a world of power and vengeance, Jesus said, "A new commandment I give you – love others as I have loved you" looking us straight in the eyes as he said it. To a world of violence, Jesus walked straight into its heart of violence, dying on a cross, more alone than we can ever imagine feeling in our worst scenario in which we imagine our faith might not survive. And to a world ever under the dark cloud of death's power Christ arose, the light of life that chases away our deepest existential, spiritual doubts.

Those real doubts are actually a gift. To ask like Sara Groves did, “If I can picture a scenario when my faith would fail, it means my faith is failing me now” is a gift. Because this doubt, when honestly considered and prayed over, pulls us out of our individual lives and into the whole arc of faith, planting us firmly on the other side of the Easter story. In that place of doubting, searching faith, wherever we’ve hidden ourselves away, Jesus appears in our midst and says “Peace be with you.” As we weep over our scars, Jesus shows us his scars and weeps with us. As we struggle for breath, Jesus breathes upon us, sharing the Holy Spirit that gives life to dry bones and hope when we were so sure our faith would collapse. When we cannot let go of the past, Jesus redirects us by sending us out to forgive as disciples of his ever-future-looking kingdom.

Ultimately, Thomas is a bit of a distraction. But he too even comes around to profess “My Lord and my God!” And if he truly meant every word of that, maybe even his doubts were a gift as well. The physicist Richard Feynman once wrote, “If you know that you are not sure, you have a chance to improve the situation.”² That’s a gift. And the great physicist and teacher and risen Lord said, “Whatever you can imagine, I have seen and have overcome. Do not be afraid. Follow my example. I’ll be with you always.” That’s a real gift – a resurrection gift. No doubt about it.

AMEN

¹ “The Gift of Doubt,” Camerin Courtney, interview with Sara Groves, *Christianity Today/Today’s Christian Woman*, March/April 2006, p. 18.

² New York Times Book Review of Richard Feynman’s *The Meaning of It All*, May 17, 1998, p. 50.