

Our moments of doubts can lead us to a deeper faith. When we have our doubts about something spiritually it should lead us to God's word. We should spend more time reading the Bible. We should spend more time praying for wisdom. We should spend more time in the fellowship of other believers and seeking their encouragement and wisdom. When we have our doubts they can be the very moment we are on the brink of our faith growing and deepening.

Our moments of doubt can lead us to a deeper dependence upon Christ. In those moments when there are no obvious answers and life is filled with more mystery than certainty, we turn to Christ and simply say I believe. We become dependent upon Christ and do not lean on our own understanding. That my friend is a true moment of faith. It is a place of true release.

Thomas was a doubter. The others made a place for him and his doubts led him to a new depth of faith.

Finally, we cannot miss that Jesus comes to Thomas so that Thomas might have faith. We many times think that faith is on us and not the work of God. Yet, the Bible teaches us that it is God who is at work bringing us to faith, enabling us to have faith and finishing our faith. Jesus Christ is the author and finisher of our faith. Jesus comes to Thomas that he might have faith. One of the most telling moments of scripture is that Jesus comes to Thomas and in that moment we realize that Jesus' scars are still there. Jesus in His resurrected body has scars. There are many suggestions of why this is true, but here is the one that I like the most is Spurgeon's thought when he wrote that Jesus' scars are His ornaments of victory. They are His trophies of victory. They are the reminder of the victory that God has granted.

In the global war on terror, less men and women have died in battle than in previous wars but the number of disabled veterans has been larger. This is mostly due to advance medical treatment where many who would not have survived in previous wars have survived and we are thankful to God for this. The result has been that nearly 700,000 men and women are classified as disabled in some form or fashion from most recent wars.

So, now the sight of many of our combat veterans with prosthetic limbs or other scarring injuries is a more common sight. Of course we can never know the depth of the scars that do not show, as many suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. What we can say about the scars we see and those we do not see is that they are the reminder of cost of freedom.

St. Augustine wrote, "Perhaps in that kingdom we shall see on the bodies of the Martyrs the traces of the wounds which they bore for Christ's name: because it will not be a deformity, but a dignity in them; and a certain kind of beauty will shine in them, in the body, though not of the body" (De Civ. Dei xxii).

Our scars are not to be a sign of defeat, but of victory. Our doubts are not to lead to defeat, but to a deeper faith and victory. Jesus comes to Thomas to lead him to faith and Jesus' scars are a visible testimony that no matter what we are passing through in life, through Jesus it is leading us to victory and not defeat.

When we face doubts they can lead us to despair, but if we bring them to Jesus they can become moments of deeper faith.

When the Son of Man returns, will he find faith? Our God is good, our God cares, our God is loving, our God is attentive, our God is active, our God is working, our God hears our cries and responds. Stop doubting and believe.



RESURRECTION STORIES

Faith Restored

John 24:19-31

TRINITY PULPIT

Jesus asked this question, "When the Son of Man returns will he find faith on the earth?" Jesus asked this question in response to His parable about the woman who continued to ask of the unjust judge and wore him down until the judge granted her request. Jesus responds to this parable by saying that will not God give to those who He has chosen and who cry out. The point of the parable is not that we have to wear God out with our requests, but just the opposite. The point of the parable is that if an unjust judge will finally give justice, then surely our God who is just will hear the cries of God's loved ones and respond. Jesus is asking us to believe and have faith that our God is good, our God cares, our God is loving, our God is attentive, our God is active, our God is working, our God is hears our cries and responds. Then Jesus asks, "but will we have faith?" Can we believe that our God is the one who cares, hears and acts? When Jesus returns, will He find faith on this earth? Maybe the question for us today is simply, can we have faith even in the world in which we live?

We must admit that it is hard sometimes to muster faith. There have been other cultures where faith was simpler. There have been times, in the not too distant past, that having faith in Jesus was not only accepted as a norm in our culture, but also celebrated more than it is today. There have been times, when of course the church was the center of governments, nations and cultures. Now that can be good in some ways, but of course in other ways as we Baptist learned centuries ago that can also lead to persecution. Sometimes a cultural faith can actually diminish true personal faith.

However, we must admit that sometimes having faith is hard for us. To believe the God is just, God cares, listens and acts is

sometimes hard to grasp.

We have been looking at the resurrection stories this year in our aftermath of Easter, and last week we considered how hope was restored through the resurrection of Jesus. Now today, I want us to consider that faith was restored through the resurrection of Jesus. Faith not only in Jesus, but faith in the God who sent Jesus as well. Jesus' resurrection is almost God saying to us "I told you so, and you can trust me to be faithful."

When we read the account of Thomas' encounter with Jesus we can draw several conclusions. Jesus has been raised from the dead and is appearing to His disciples and followers. He has appeared to the women and to Mary in particular. He has appeared to the two followers on their way back home to Emmaus. He then on that first day of resurrection also enters the room with His disciples who are trying to make sense of the empty tomb, the women's testimony and with their own fear and confusion. They are in that upper room where they had gathered just a few days earlier to celebrate with Jesus the Passover meal. Now they were there without Him afraid and wondering what the future held. In that moment, Jesus appears to them and says to them "peace be with you." Do not be alarmed, do not be afraid, but be confident. Jesus not only appeared to them, He also empowered them to leave this room and go with confidence in the power of the Holy Spirit.

This encounter speaks to the disciples and their faith. They are not only to be encouraged, but they are to be confident that God is still at work and now will be working fully and completely through them. They are overjoyed we are told when they see Jesus. Then, we have this side note that Thomas was not with the others when Jesus appeared.



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It is pure speculation where Thomas might have been. However, it is important for us to know that Thomas, the one is sometimes maligned because of his doubt is the only one not hiding out at the moment. He is out and about. Was he chosen to run an errand? Was he just not the type to sit around and go stir crazy? Was he a man who had incredible courage in the face of threats? From what we know of Thomas the later seems to be true.

In one of the other references to Thomas in the gospels, the disciples are trying to deter Jesus from going to Jerusalem because they know that the Jewish leaders were plotting to kill Jesus. However, it is Thomas who speaks up with great courage and says if Jesus is going we will go with Him and die. In other words, if following Jesus means dying with Jesus, then so be it. There is not another one who spoke with such courage. Thomas does seem to be the one who is not going to be deterred by the threats of those who wanted Jesus dead. So, while the others were behind the locked door, Thomas was not there.

When Thomas returns the disciples tell of their experience with Jesus but instead of being overjoyed at the news, Thomas is skeptical. Thomas is quite the realist. He faces life with the facts and the consequences. He is not afraid of the consequences, but he does not live life in the shadows of unsubstantiated stories. Here is what he knows, Jesus has died and was buried and unless he sees it for himself he will not believe.

We are told that one week later... don't miss this. One week later they are there again. It has been a week since Jesus' resurrection. There are no sightings and encounters between day one and day 8. There is only the one moment and here they are in the same place as they were the week before. The majority of them have seen the risen Lord and yet, not much has changed. It has been a week and they are still at the house with the door locked. How I wish we had a record of the week's conversation. How many of them believed at this point? We are told in Matthew's gospel that even at the moment of the Great Commission that when the disciples saw Jesus they worshipped Him but some doubted. In other words, the gospels are pretty clear that faith and belief for these first followers of Jesus came in a process like it does for so many today and that each one was at different places in their faith. We just don't know what the others were thinking at this point. We just don't know how many who first saw

Jesus have remained convinced, who are having their doubts and who like Thomas were saying I need a little more.

That is when Jesus comes again. He appears again to the disciples and followers and this time Thomas is there. Jesus appears and again says "Peace be with you." Then Jesus' next word is directly to Thomas. Thomas put your finger here in my wounds. Reach out and put your hand in my side and stop doubting and believe.

We have no record of Thomas touching Jesus, but instead falling to his needs in worship and proclamation you are my Lord and God. In that moment Thomas' faith is restored once and for all.

Then Jesus offers to you and me a blessing. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet still believe. The resurrection of Jesus restores our faith in God and God's character and faithfulness to us. What are some thoughts for us to consider regarding Jesus' resurrection and faith?

I think Thomas' story is a reminder that we must make room for the doubt and for doubters. I find it interesting throughout the gospels and the resurrection stories who many references there are to doubt. The first disciples had their moments of doubt on their way to faith. In our text this morning Thomas is with the others and a week has passed and though the others were proclaiming the resurrection, Thomas doubted and yet he was still there. They had not locked him out because of his doubt. They had made a place for him as they had for each other as they were all on their way to faith.

Can we make a place for the doubter? Over and over again surveys and articles tell us that people want a church that will allow space for questions in regards to faith. They want a safe place where they can voice the questions of their deepest fears, confusion and doubts without being judged and rejected. They want a place where they might differ in their conclusions at this point in life but still are loved and accepted. Thomas, the doubter, still has his place with the others. Maybe he is there because he has always been a part of the group. Maybe his voicing his doubts and struggles is a voice for others who were not willing to express their own. Yet, he is there.

Now don't hear me wrong. Doubt is not the end of the journey. I am not saying that God desires for us to live life in doubt and not faith. Of course not.

Jesus says to Thomas stop doubting and believe. That is the step we all need to take. Our hope for everyone is that they move from doubt to belief. The question is simply can we find the grace to welcome the one who is filled with more doubt than belief and encourage them on their way to belief?

What are we to do with our own doubts? What are we to make of the moments in life where those of us who are believers and followers of Jesus are having our doubts?

It happens for so many in their moments of disappointment and crisis. We can read the Thomas story as a faith crisis story. Thomas has experienced the great disappointment of life. Thomas has suffered the unjust death of a loved one and one whom he believed was the Messiah. Thomas' loss is not simply the loss of a loved one to death, but the loss of the future, the loss of the normal, the loss of meaning and purpose. Everything is taken away in the cross of Jesus. This brave and courageous man is questioning it all.

Faith crisis come to us in those moments when death comes to those we love. It comes when our future becomes uncertain. Faith crisis comes when the world seems unjust and out of control. Just like we make room for that doubter in our midst, we also must make room for the doubts that arise within us. We must address them and let them become moments of glorious renewal. Thomas does not deny his doubt and yet, his doubt becomes a moment when his faith is completed and deepened and he sees for himself the risen Lord.

So are doubts good or bad for our faith. I like what Brian McLaren wrote about this several years ago when he was serving as a Pastor. Brian wrote:

When committed Christians come to me to talk about their doubts, one of the first things I say to them is this: doubt is not always bad. Sometimes doubt is absolutely essential. I think of doubt as analogous to pain. Pain tells us that something nearby or within us is dangerous to our physical body. It is a call for attention and action. Similarly, I think doubt tells us that something in us ... a concept, an idea, a framework of thinking ... deserves further attention because it may be harmful, or false, or imbalanced.

OUR SCARS ARE NOT TO BE A SIGN OF DEFEAT, BUT OF VICTORY. OUR DOUBTS ARE NOT TO LEAD TO DEFEAT, BUT TO A DEEPER FAITH AND VICTORY.

Maybe you think I'm suggesting that doubt can actually be virtuous. I suppose I am – but not always. There is a dark kind of doubt, an exaggerated and self-destructive kind of doubt that leads to despair, depression, and spiritual self-sabotage. I think of it like this: an imagination is good, but imagination out of control is called psychosis. Fear is healthy, but fear out of control is called paranoia. Sensitivity is a wonderful gift, and anger is a necessary emotion, but sensitivity or anger out of control can lead to depression. Doubt is the same way. Out of control, it becomes unbelief, a hard heart, and an arrogant or defeatist cynicism. But in balance, it is our Geiger counter for error. Without it, we'd be gullible, naïve, stupid ... not great spiritual qualities! It's a lot like guilt. Francis Schaeffer used to say that guilt was like a watchdog – useful to have around to alert you to danger. But if the watchdog turns and attacks the homeowner, it needs to be restrained and retrained.

So, if you ask, "Is doubt good or bad?" I'd have to answer, "Yes." It can go either way.

The answer regarding our doubts is what we do with them. Do we let them lead us away from Christ or too Christ. Pastor Matt Chandler writes in one of his sermons that doubts can actually be the work of the Holy Spirit's conviction in our lives. That is when we have doubts they should cause us to let the Holy Spirit work in our lives.

Our moments of doubt create an incredible place for growth. They create the very opportunity to choose faith.

If you are having doubts about your salvation, this might be the very work of the Holy Spirit whose conviction is at work in your life. Maybe you have been raised in the church. Maybe you are just a good person and you come to church, you try to treat others with respect and dignity. You are a good neighbor, but there is in you a nagging doubt about your relationship with God. Is it real? Have you come to a place where you confessed your sins, received God's forgiveness, and chose to believe that Jesus and Jesus alone is the way to eternal life and abundant life? The doubts you might have about salvation could be the work of the Holy Spirit leading you to a saving faith.
