

Reasonable Doubt

John 20:11-31

April 28, 2019

Troy Taylor

Our story from Scripture today is about a guy that we've named Doubting Thomas for all eternity. Here, we see Jesus encounter Thomas' skepticism, and we think he is getting reprimanded pretty blatantly. I'd like to look under the hood a little bit, here, and see how Jesus deals with doubt. I think that there are three things to note: first, that doubt is reasonable. Second, that doubt is not necessarily the opposite of belief. And third, that Jesus is relentless in his pursuit of us.

So first, doubt is reasonable.

What do you think about this? I suspect that the problem I have with Thomas is not so much his doubt, but his relatability! After all, think about what he has been through over the last three years! He's invested time, energy, sacrificed money, employment, community, and he has hitched his little wagon to someone that he thinks is Messiah. He's seen all of the miracles (John calls them signs), he's heard Jesus make all of his claims that he is God (these are the "I AM" statements that we have been looking at for the last couple of months). And then, right at the moment that it looks like everything is going according to plan, all of his expectations bleed out onto the ground in water and blood, pouring from the spear pierced side of his crucified messiah.

Historical note: People don't tend to recover from that. It isn't as though Thomas has never seen a crucifixion before. He knows what it means. He has seen other revolutionaries, rebels, or traitors meet their end on a cross. Everything in Thomas' experience, his upbringing, his religion, says that Messiah does not end up dead. Messiah is supposed to free Israel, lead a new exodus, and establish his kingdom. Just like our skepticism of advertising, politicians, media, and more, Thomas has been conditioned by his experiences to know certain things.

Thomas gets the nickname of doubting, but he isn't the only one to fail the resurrection test.

Mary meets Jesus in the garden. The angels didn't tip her off, and she turns around and sees Jesus. Except her mind is conditioned by a lifetime of experiences that tell her that this cannot be Jesus. So, she misunderstands. She assumes that Jesus is the Gardner.

Then Mary hears something that she has probably heard hundreds of times over the last few years.

Mary.

Her name, on the lips of her savior.

And she recognizes him!

So, she runs back to tell the disciples what she has seen.

But this isn't enough for the disciples. They are hiding. In a room. All together, except for Thomas. With a locked door. The word of Mary isn't enough for them to be brave — they are scared! And then Jesus is just standing there, in the middle of where he isn't supposed to be.

The disciples are in their place of fear, locked away, terrified to deal with the mess in their life. Does that sound relatable to anyone? And then, Jesus is in the middle of their fear, worry, and grief. The secret place is the very place where Jesus meets the disciples, and shows them his side. He shows them his hands, the very ones that pulled Peter out of the water, that lifted the young girl from her deathbed, and that wiped away tears of grief over Lazarus' death. And he brings peace with him.

Poor Thomas. All we really know about him comes from the Gospel of John. This is the guy in 11:15-16 who says that if Jesus is going to Jerusalem to die, they may as well go along with him. At least they can all die together! Then, in 14:4-5, he complains that Jesus is being deliberately obscure, confusing the poor disciples, who by the way are going to Jerusalem to die with him. We know that he is a twin, because his Greek name means twin. And now, we discover that Thomas is the only one who is left out of the appearance of Jesus to his followers.

So, Thomas runs into the disciples, who have this fantastic story about seeing Jesus standing there with them, despite the door being locked, and Jesus being, well, dead! Everything that Thomas knows says that this is either impossible, or a hallucination brought on by stress, or some kind of evil spell. Having had hope crushed once before, Thomas refuses to be suckered in again by the same story. He has come by his skepticism honestly!

Tell me honestly, what would your first reaction be?

Why didn't Thomas believe his friends?

I would suggest that this is the challenge of assumptions, things that we simply know to be true. Thomas has been conditioned to assume that he understands how things work, just like Mary. You see, orthodox belief says that crucified people stay dead. It says that the leader of a movement being killed is not good news for the followers. It says that power is in the hands of the strong. But it takes faith to understand a reality where the dead do not stay that way, that the king of the Jews is the risen, Creator God almighty, and that power is in the hands of the servant.

Our own experiences and culture heavily influence what we assume to be true, and how we interpret scripture. At different times in different places, the church has held different beliefs to be required! No musical instruments, silent women, circumcised men, speaking in tongues, infant baptism, adult baptism, young earth, marriage, celibacy, even capitalism and democracy — each of these had their day in the sun. But they are not the center of the gospel! It will be a sad day when we stop allowing our assumptions to be challenged. Friends, if we ever hear a sermon, read scripture, take a class, or anything else, and think that we have nothing left to discover, we let our assumptions and pride lead us rather than the Holy Spirit. Please don't misunderstand me. There are beliefs that are necessary to call yourself a Christian. I am saying that the list might be shorter than you imagine. It is worth being curious, and examining the positions that we have made equal to the gospel of Jesus Christ dying for our sins, rising from the dead, and our own hope of resurrection if we believe in him.

Second, is doubt the opposite of believing?

We return to our band of heroes who, despite Jesus' peace and command to be sent, are once again locked in their hiding place. But Thomas is with them this time! Thomas, who refuses to take the disciples' word for it. Thomas, who joins the long list of people who need proof.

And Jesus' response to him is simply, "Stop doubting and believe!"

This raises a question for me. Is it that simple? Can you just stop doubting and believe something? Is it really just a matter of choosing? And why, if the blessing is for those who have not seen and yet believe, does Jesus go so far out of his way to give Thomas the proof he needs, while not giving it to us?

We've misunderstood this section. Jesus' response isn't that simple. First, he has offered Thomas the same proof that he offered the other disciples — his hands, his side, his presence. Then, he invites Thomas to commit himself to a reality in which crucified people still come over for dinner.

I don't really see Jesus' comment to him as a rebuke, at least not completely. Rather, this is what it looks like when people see God. It is an invitation! This is the incredible story of the messiah, who came to his own creation because of love. He put aside his divinity, and clothed himself in mud. He set down his crown and put on thorns. He stepped down from his throne and stepped up to a cross. He set down life, and entered death. Why, in the name of all that is good and pure, would we expect Thomas' doubt to be the obstacle that Jesus looks at, and says, "Nope. Too far! Too much!" Of course Jesus pushes through Thomas' skepticism, because Jesus is absolutely relentless in his pursuit of his creation. It is for this reason that Jesus became human in the first place! It was for people like Thomas!

So many people say that they would believe in God if he only revealed himself. I understand that feeling, but I'm not buying it. You could say, I'm skeptical!

In Luke 16:19-31, Jesus talks about our remarkable ability to ignore signs. That conversation ends with this:

27 "He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, **28** for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.'
29 "Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.'
30 "'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.'
31 "He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

John begins his story with 1:18, which says: "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known." So, everyone including Thomas, has to believe in God without seeing. John's story is that Jesus making the Father known. Through seven miraculous signs and seven I Am statements, John reveals God in Jesus. But people have an incredible capacity to doubt what they see and hear! In John, they react with disbelief, outright hostility, or repentance. They mistake Jesus for a prophet, or a military messiah (John 7:40-44).

And John ends it here, with three stories of three times when people saw Jesus, after he had died. This is the beginning of the proof that God is offering us. He ends this story with Thomas.

Thomas, who refuses to get left out of the group. He keeps meeting with them. Thomas, courageous, loyal, steadfast, a little bit doom and gloom, and stubborn. Thomas perseveres, and he is rewarded! Did you know that Thomas is the first person in John's gospel to really get it? In John, only Thomas actually puts all of the signs and statements together completely.

"You are Master, you are God!"

Here is the hard truth. Doubt, I don't think, ever really goes away. At least, it hasn't for me. While I no longer struggle with God's existence, there are thorny questions that I have no answer to, and these seeds of doubt continue to nag at me.

G. K. Chesterton said, "Merely having an open mind is nothing. The object of opening the mind, as of opening the mouth, is to shut it again on something solid."

John 20:30 says:

"Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

John is trying to give us that something solid. He has written his whole book so that we might believe in Jesus as Messiah. He is giving us the opportunity to close our minds on something solid, something established in his context as legally proven, as beyond myth, lunacy, or legend.

I have many flaws. Kirstin often has told me that when we are discussing things, I will respond with, "The problem with that is. . ." I'm a skeptic. In our culture, we value skepticism. We want a full picture before we will commit to anything, to be guaranteed success. We hold tight to our doubts, and loosely to belief. Stop doubting and believe is an invitation to flip the default, to hold tightly to the belief in a good God, and loosely to our questions and doubts, until we receive either wisdom or clarity. Stop doubting and believe is asking Thomas (and us!) to commit wholeheartedly to a new reality in which people who get hung on a cross can still come and hang out with their friends the next week. Jesus is the great I AM, the Messiah, and the light of the world.

Finally, the relentlessness of Jesus.

Remember, that famous verse, John 3:16.

"For God so loved the world, that he sent his one and only son, that whoever believed in him would have eternal life!"

It is this love that I see all over Jesus' interaction with Thomas. His wonderful, amazing, compassionate, relentless love. If this is what you need, then here it is. When Jesus says that there is a blessing for those who do not see and yet believe, does he mean that Thomas does not receive a blessing? Certainly not! Thomas has his hands on the Messiah, the resurrected king of the universe! Rather, this is an indication that those who will believe through the witness of John offered in verse 30 will receive the blessing of Jesus' resurrection. This is for us!

As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you. . .

Yikes! Is relentless a word that applies to me? In my relationship with Jesus? In my compassion, grace, and mercy for those who struggle, or believe differently from me? For those who need anything that I have?

Because this is ultimately what it means to believe. This is the blessing: to be sent out, to give, just as Jesus was sent to us.