

John 20:19-31

Stop Being Faithless

The story of Thomas is very interesting because it acknowledges the reality of doubt. Thomas was, of course, one of the “twelve” disciples that accompanied Jesus during his ministry years. Though Thomas was not a part of the more intimate inner circle with Peter, James, and John, nevertheless his part in the resurrection story stood out enough to receive its own narrative.

Thomas wasn't present the first time Jesus appeared to the twelve in a locked room where they anxiously awaited what they supposed might be a fate similar to that of Jesus. And when Thomas was told about it by the others, he refused to believe. He said, “unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my fingers where the nails were, and put my hand in his side, I will not believe.” For Thomas, not even seeing was believing, he wanted to touch.

For his unbelief he has traveled through history with the unflattering moniker, “Doubting Thomas.” It is at this point that I am obliged to say something about Thomas being from Missouri, because in effect he said, “you have got show me.” So consider it said.

Or maybe we can see Thomas as being ahead of his time and fitting better into the scientific era in which

proof of something is required if it is to be believed. Thomas was skeptical, and we can relate.

Doubt

Everyone has doubts about things now and again. And the resurrection of the dead is on less sturdy scientific and historical ground than most things. Even Jesus told Thomas, “you have believed because you have seen, blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe.” That is who we are, among those who have not seen, and yet believe.

In honest moments most would admit that from time-to-time doubts creep in. The resurrection is a remarkable claim that does not submit itself to scientific verification. Some just don't believe it. While I don't think anyone decides to accept or reject the gospel because on a scientific experiment or an historical investigation, we believe, or don't believe for other reasons. I think the other reasons have to do with pain and suffering, and with what philosophers call, the problem of evil. What ever the reasons might be, we all have a little skepticism in us.

We are a little like Thomas, who was apparently from Missouri (there, I have said it) and claimed he needed physical proof before he would believe. He wanted to live by sight and not by faith.

He doubted the big thing; the resurrection of Jesus himself. If you are like me, it is smaller doubts that reveal the shallowness and weakness of our faith. I doubt the transformation of things. I accept the failures of the human spirit that characterize the news of the day and of our lives, and have trouble with the idea they can be overcome.

A New heart and a New Spirit

I think of a NT class I took when I was in seminary in the fall of 1988. It was about the book of Romans. The professor was a part of a Billy Graham evangelistic team and missed two weeks in the middle of the semester to go to East Germany for a crusade.

Upon his return he was asked if the Iron Curtain that divided Eastern Europe from the West would ever come down? Would the wall that sectioned off a part of Berlin from the rest of the world ever be taken apart?

His answer was an emphatic “No.” His belief was that the kind of miracle required was not on the horizon in what was then the foreseeable future. I remember thinking he was probably right. I must admit that I am guilty of this kind of doubt.

Then the fall of 1989 happened - one year later, the unthinkable miracle occurred, reminding me to be careful about my doubts.

Still, whatever “miracle of the human spirit” brought the end to global communism and the Cold War, it was not the ultimate change of the human spirit really needed. A new set of problems have arisen; global terrorism, a refugee crisis, the phenomenon called “trafficking,” persistent poverty, the threat of war. At best, *we are not sure* if we should expect the human race to receive at last the new heart and new spirit so desperately needed.

We see the problems reflected in the decline of Christian expression in an increasingly secular world and wonder if the trends will ever be reversed again.

And our doubts are compounded not only by this religious decline, but also in countless failures within the Christian community - clergy sex scandals, failures of greed and materialism, persistent racism and sexism that sometimes use the Christian faith to entrench rather than cast out what must be called bigotry and xenophobia, which are, respectively, an intolerance and a fear of those who are different - no matter the cause of the differences. It is very discouraging.

Will the divisions that divide us ever lose their power?
When will another 1989 come to rescue us and give us
hope again that the miraculous victory claimed in
Jesus' resurrection, celebrated at Easter will turn the
day?

Stop Doubting and Believe

The question is not really about the actual
transformation of the world. It is about trust, our faith
that the transformation is real even though it is not
manifest; which is a way of saying that the victory is
won though the game isn't over; the changes are as
good as in the bank though they haven't been played
out in history. Jesus is alive - but we don't see . . .

In answer to Thomas's "show-me state" skepticism
Jesus makes a rather difficult-to-translate yet very
thought provoking statement. As literally as I can make
it:

"Stop being unbelieving, but believing"

"Do not be unfaith - but faith"

"Stop doubting and believe"

The interchange can be seen in a dramatic way with
emotion, or in a-matter-of-fact way, Jesus telling
Thomas to "stop being faithless," to stop acting like he
doesn't believe, like he thinks the answer is, "no."

This is the message for us today too. No matter the
circumstance in your life or in the world, it is all
redeemed, made holy, shaped and formed by the
victory of life and goodness and meaning that
happened when Jesus was raised from death.

If you are like me, it is always good to be reminded
about my faith, and to stop acting like it isn't so. Stop
pretending you think the answer is "No." It is "Yes." It
always has been. It will always be. Never give up.
Never stop believing. Stop being faithless.

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