

John 20:19-31 Doubts and Faith
April 28, 2019

Among the accounts of the resurrection appearances, there are four that refer to individual encounters, in addition to and sometimes incorporated into the times that Jesus appeared to the larger group. These include the meeting with Mary in the garden when she mistook him for the gardener, the two disciples on the Road to Emmaus, the re-instatement of Peter when Jesus told him three times to feed the lambs, and the story of Thomas, who was reluctant to believe what he could not see.

Each one of these individual meetings involves a different aspect of faith; with Mary and the two on the Emmaus Road, it was the inability to even recognize the Risen Lord, their minds having no framework to see the impossible even when it was right in front of them, sight requires faith; and with the two on the Emmaus road it involved an enhanced understanding of the scriptures.

With Peter the meeting with Jesus involved forgiveness and restitution after the three denials on the night of the arrest. And finally, with Thomas, the nearly modern skepticism of thinking there must be a natural explanation for everything and the need to see, to walk by sight and not by faith.

It is the Doubting Thomas story that is up for grabs this day. In the past, when this story comes up, it has been easy to relate to the modern scientific

skepticism, that is, the intellectual objection. I would like to try a different perspective today.

The World

Think of the world's sadness. While that may seem an odd approach at Easter time, it leads us to consider the other, and more difficult objection to faith; the problem of pain. Though most people know positive experiences, they also live under the threat of the negative, the threat of catastrophe, the threat of death. In the words of the 23rd Psalm, we live in the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

Even in the last week we have seen the terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka, which some believe are retaliations for the mosque attack in New Zealand. There is the bi-polar nature of American political discourse, the environmental crisis, that is, the problem of natural disaster, increasingly more common, and the perception of the general decline of the Christian faith in Western civilization, all among other things.

It doesn't matter much what you believe about any of these things. It is possible to be completely unmoved by one of the crises and obsessed with another. I only hope you can see how negative the atmosphere is, that each of these factors contributes to a sense of vulnerability.

And I haven't even mentioned personal issues, cancer and other diseases, relational problems, personal

economic struggles, and the like. There is a pervasive sense of gloom. Rather than an intellectual challenge, let us examine Thomas's doubt in the context of the world's sadness.

The Time of John (or Jesus)

Let us be reminded that in the time of the Gospel of John, the latter part of what we call the first century, there was also a profound gloominess, especially for those of the Jewish faith, and their cousins, the Christians. Now I am not going to say that things got better then so we should be encouraged that things will get better now. *It is just that this gloominess is universal.*

In their time the Roman Empire was at its beginning as an empire; the century was violent and destructive, there had been a war in the Jewish homeland, and the Holy City of Jerusalem and the Temple itself had been destroyed. One of the results was a competition between different forms of Jewish expression which led to a break, a division between the Christians and the way of the Rabbis.

The Christians were in the process of being excluded from the larger group, and excluding themselves, throughout the first century's latter half. It was painful and unsure, like the ground giving way under one's feet.

One can be critical of Thomas for refusing to believe Jesus had been raised unless he saw him; a failure of

faith some Christians in John's time shared, who surely. But to impose on them modern scientific sensitivities can cause us to miss another point, that their doubts were driven by their sadness, the expectations of disappointment that come from a lifetime of disappointments; the expectation of bad news.

The Condition

The biblical assessment of the human condition is accepted:

Like it or not, everyone has been given this life for a little while. No one is able to choose the circumstances of their birth, time and place, family, gender, gifts and abilities, etc. None has any control over the state of the world they were born into.

I did not choose to live in post-ww2 suburban America with its relative affluence, greed and excess, and inherent racism and sexism and bigotry. If I had the choice, I might have chosen another place and time, maybe the same time and another place. I wonder what it would be like to come from California.

Like it or not, everyone sins. There is both a sense of moral demand, a standard of goodness we should achieve, one that seems to come from beyond any legal authority or cultural standard.

Our lives are completely given to us, as if we are not responsible. And yet also they are demanded *of* us, as

if we are completely responsible. This moral demand is accompanied by the recognition that we are unable to live up to it, thus guilt and condemnation become a part of the human experience.

This state of things is the human condition. Everyone lives for awhile, everyone sins, and everyone dies, and everyone wants it to matter, for life to be full of meaning and not empty.

That You May Believe

Yet if we are to be complete in our telling of truth, we must say more. In addition to the wondrous and beautiful side of earthly life, it is also true that we have received *more* than these blessings; Mercy has triumphed over judgment. Our lives are filled with love and acceptance, beauty and grace, peace and joy, we must tell this truth too. And there is the promise of eternal life; the Resurrection of the Dead is more than a doctrine but a present hope.

What is happening with Thomas and the other disciples is that they are being confronted by a truth that challenges not only their understanding, but also their experience of the shadow side of human life, their sad conception of what is possible in this gloomy world.

Resurrection faith means we see *past* the circumstances and the apparent conclusions to a hopefulness that transcends them. It leads to a

persistence no matter how gloomy things become. It is the only way to remain healthy and live true.

That is the contradiction that confronts Thomas; that the sad and gloomy news of the world has been swallowed up in good news. And he has grown used to the bad news. Like many of us, he had come to shudder when the phone rings, because too often it brings bad news. It wasn't so much he didn't believe in the idea of resurrection as that he had come to the common conclusion that a good day is one with no bad news in it.

So when the overwhelming evidence was thrust into his presence, he proclaimed his faith, "My Lord and My God." We call him "doubting Thomas," but perhaps we should call him, "believing Thomas," given the way things worked out.

This very text says that much more could be written about Jesus, but *this* has been written so that we can believe, and because of that faith, find life; full, and free.

So let us also believe, and in faith see past what seems obvious, the gloom and doom of things, to the glorious bounty of our heavenly treasure, too rich to be told, too good to be true.

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