

Thomas's Proof

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

April 18, 2021

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Mark 9:14–24 (NRSV)

¹⁴When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. ¹⁵When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. ¹⁶He asked them, “What are you arguing about with them?” ¹⁷Someone from the crowd answered him, “Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; ¹⁸and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.” ¹⁹He answered them, “You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.” ²⁰And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. ²¹Jesus asked the father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood. ²²It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.” ²³Jesus said to him, “If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes.” ²⁴Immediately the father of the child cried out, “I believe; help my unbelief!”

John 20:24–29 (NRSV)

²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” ²⁸Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Doubts? We've all got 'em . . . even Thomas.

Last week, we talked about truth, the truth of the resurrection, revealed in Peter himself. Denier to Proclaimer. This week we turn to doubt and its champion, a disciple named Thomas. But before we get to his story, I want to take a look at another story about doubt, belief, and the hard truth of trusting that which we cannot see.

A Father and his son

You'd think that the Christian journey would get easier as we go along. We'd be growing in our faith and understanding as we come to an ever-deeper appreciation of God and his grace. We'd come to embrace the radical change that marks our transformation into mature disciples of Jesus.

But that's really not how it is for many of us. With great enthusiasm we give ourselves to Jesus and are carried along by the joy and newness of it all. But then, as we start to take the Bible seriously and really listen to the preachers, we find that questions start to sprout up, good questions, important questions that challenge our still newly born faith. We don't know whether to keep going or to turn around and go back, thinking we'd be happier staying as infants in the faith. After all, didn't Jesus say that we are to come to him as little children? Sometimes it seems like it would be best simply to hide from it all, resting peacefully in our own little comfort zone.

I imagine that the disciples felt a bit like that in the days after the transfiguration when Peter, James, and John had been to the top of the “spiritual mountain” (Mark 9:2-13, the story immediately preceding today’s passage from Mark). They hadn’t comprehended the events on that hillside, but they knew it was big. So, imagine their surprise when they couldn’t drive out a demon out of a possessed boy. Perhaps they thought they had come far enough with Jesus that they could overwhelm the spiritual forces of wickedness with the snap of a finger or the utterance of a few “magic” words. But, instead, things were getting harder for them and they had failed the boy and his father utterly.

So the father had turned to Jesus himself, pleading, “If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.” I try to imagine the look Jesus gave the father as he said, “IF?” But the father’s immediate reply is the most memorable part of this story: “*I believe; help my unbelief!*”

This simple plea, so heartfelt and honest, has drawn Christians to this man for two millennia. In those few words, he speaks for us all. Who amongst us has not struggled with doubts and unbelief? Is it not ironic that this famous phrase is uttered in the midst of a story about demon-possession, to which we are inclined to say:

A demon, really!? Sure sounds like an epileptic seizure. But the Bible says it is a demon. Jesus speaks as if it is a demon. Do I have to believe it was an actual demon to believe the Bible, to be a good Christian? Do I have to believe in demons? But, then again, what about angels? . . . *and so on it goes.*

Sometimes I think that those who don’t struggle with doubts and belief don’t really understand the radically extraordinary nature of the claims we make. We domesticate

Belief and Faith

We translate the Greek word, *pistis*, as “faith.” Regrettably, though *pistis* has a verb form, “faith” does not. No one says, “I faithed yesterday.” This is too bad, because Bible translations use “believe” as the verb form of “faith,” even though “believe” speaks to a state of mind, including an opinion. Similarly, “doubt” refers to a state of mind. But the best synonym for “faith” is “trust.” Faith speaks more to matters of the heart than does belief. It is not so much, “What do you think?,” as it is “Whom do you trust?” Doubt is a “head” word,” but “faith” is a heart word.

Easter and lose our wonder at the claim of bodily resurrection. Even the disciples struggled to believe such a thing. Take Thomas for example – the most famous doubter of all.

The truth of doubt

Yes, Thomas had doubts. Poor guy got the label “Doubting Thomas.” Big deal. We all have doubts. We are doubt-producing machines. And like Thomas, our doubts are reasonable. Think about it. We claim that 2,000 years ago a Galilean Jew died and was then resurrected to a newly embodied life. Not a ghost. Not resuscitated. But living anew, bodily, on the other side of death, never to look back. And we even claim that the same will be true for us all one day.

As hard as it might seem to believe such claims, when it comes to spiritual and religious matters, it is really not so much that America is a nation of unbelievers; rather, we are a nation of *half-believers*, carrying around vague notions of our deeply felt spiritual hunger. Sometimes we believe more than we would like to admit. At other times,

we prefer to deny any beliefs at all. One need only turn on the television or pick up the daily newspaper to find Americans awash in attempts to make sense of their spiritual desires. We are a nation in which most still self-identify as Christian, though many are really more “Christian-ish” than anything else, as shown in rigorous studies of Christianity in America.

In part, I think this is because we live in a world that values scientific knowledge as the only “real” knowledge, rather than embracing science as *a* way of knowing, but not the

only way. As I wrote about last week, too many people expect “proof” if they are to overcome their doubts. But outside of mathematics, I can't really think of much that we can actually prove beyond all doubt. Science, the source of most of what we consider proven knowledge, is not really about proving anything, only disproving hypotheses.

And so, with the boy's father and with Thomas, we stand there before Jesus. Like they did, we have a decision to make. Believe or not? So, we too cry out, “I believe; help my unbelief.” And key to both stories is to see that Jesus comes to them, to the boy and father, to the disciples, to Thomas (v. 26). Here is the answer to our doubts.

John's answer begins at the door we see at the start of the story. Instead of depicting a Jesus who opens it, walks right up to Thomas, and starts to argue with him by trying to answer his rationalist queries or assuaging his empirical worries, John paints a starkly different picture that tells us much about the unique character of resurrection faith and its relation to doubt.

John tells us, first, that Jesus walks through a closed, locked door to get to Thomas. It is not that Thomas's doubt drives him to demand answers from Jesus. It is Jesus who is determined to reach this stalwart skeptic, whom no one else seems able to convince. It is Jesus who refuses to let dead bolts or chains block the movement of love toward the one who lacks faith.

So too it is with us. When doubt crowds out hope, we can be confident that Jesus will come to meet us where we are, even if it is out on the far edge of faith that has forgotten how to believe. What a strange thing to hold on to—this certainty that answers to our most profound and desperate questions about life come not because we seek them with focused determination but because God comes seeking us, stepping through the walls that hardship builds around us, offering love at the very moment that grace seem nothing but a farcical ghost story told by not-to-be-believed friends.¹

A week before Thomas had scoffed at the idea of a resurrected Jesus, saying he'd have to touch the wounds for himself in order to believe (John 20:25). Now, he can touch the wounds for himself. Now he *knows* as well as he can ever know. And his response is all it could ever be: “My Lord and my God!”

But even that would not be the end of the disciples' doubts. In one of the most perplexing moments in Scripture, Matthew tells us that Jesus met his disciples on a mountain in Galilee, from which he would return to his Father. He had been resurrected about six weeks before and had been with them numerous times since. Now, at this last meeting, Matthew tells us that, “When they saw him, they worshipped him *but some doubted*.” What!! Some doubted?? How could that be? All the times they had been with him after his resurrection and yet some still doubted. What did they actually doubt? Matthew doesn't say. I guess it is enough to grasp that doubt is simply our way and must be vigilantly confronted.

Twenty or so years later, Paul is writing to a Christian fellowship that he started in Corinth, Greece. They have given up their belief in Jesus' resurrection and, hence, their own. Paul can't bring them before the risen Christ to touch his wounds or meet him on a mountain, but he can offer his own testimony and that of others. Paul tells them that he, the other apostles, and more than five hundred men and women can personally attest to the resurrection of Jesus, for they saw Jesus with their own eyes. Indeed, many are still alive, he says, and could still testify to the truth of the resurrection claim.

So it was then; so it is now. We want to believe. We want to trust Jesus completely. So we confront our doubts honestly. As part of a believing community, we strive to understand the Bible and the essential Christian beliefs. We want to make some sense

¹ Serene Jones, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year B*, 2008, 2, 402.

of it all. We put the work in. We discuss. And, all the while, we pray, *"I believe; help my unbelief"*

God's Vindication of Jesus

It would be a mistake to see Jesus' resurrection as merely the greatest of all miracles. The resurrection of Jesus was much more than a demonstration of God's power. The resurrection was God's vindication of Jesus.

On Friday afternoon, Jesus hung upon a Roman cross, a failed Messiah condemned as a traitor to Rome. To all appearances, Jesus' life and ministry had met an ignoble end. He was despised and rejected and the world "held him of no account" (Isaiah 53:3).

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, to vindicate someone is to demonstrate that the person is "free of blame, criticism, or doubt." Jesus' crucifixion seemed to dash all hope that this man had been Israel's Messiah. As far the Jews were concerned, there could simply be no such thing as a crucified Messiah.

However, Jesus' resurrection, this defeat of death, was a mind-blowing demonstration that the crucifixion was not all it had seemed. Rather than marking Jesus' failure, the cross was actually the place of God's victory over sin and death. Jesus had not been found guilty in God's law court, he had been found innocent! And, because Jesus stands before God in our place, we too are vindicated, standing before God as forgiven, blameless people.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

A study of the book of Exodus

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

A study of Jude

Meeting on-line at 12:00 noon Tuesday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like, wear your pj's.-- we're on-line now so who'd even know. Have a Bible handy.

Both classes are now recorded and are available each week in my new podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts. Search by my name, "Scott Engle".

Scott's Sunday Class

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC." **No class on April 25**

Our current series: *God's Words, the Vocabulary of Faith*

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.