

“What Are You Struggling to Believe?”

John 20:24-31

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What are you struggling to believe? How long have you struggled? Do you think others struggle as much as you or does faith come more easily for them? I wonder how Thomas would have answered these questions.

I think Thomas wanted to believe Jesus rose from the dead and all that would imply, but he simply could not. You recall that Thomas was not with the disciples on Easter evening when Jesus appeared in the upper room and spoke to them. No doubt they hurried to tell Thomas what he missed only to hear him say, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it” John 20:25. At least he didn’t say that he would never believe. That’s why I think he left the door open for the possibility.

Why was faith such a struggle for Thomas? Why couldn’t he take their word for it and rejoice with the rest of the disciples? What they were saying made no sense to him.

Perhaps from a distance he saw the tortured body of Jesus hanging on the cross and watched as Jesus drew his last breath. Maybe he talked to Joseph of Arimathea after Jesus was laid to rest in a borrowed tomb. He knew that Jesus died and was buried and nothing in him could believe that Jesus had returned. He was too honest and candid to say something he didn’t believe. Everyone would have seen through that anyway.

I also wonder if Thomas was grieving too hard to believe any good news. His heart was broken and he was devastated. He loved Jesus dearly and followed him sincerely. He believed in the Lord and was proud to be called a disciple. It all ended too soon, though. The best man he ever knew was rejected and crucified, putting an end to his good work. Thomas’ grief would not allow him to think positive thoughts. All was bleak and dreary in his world, leaving no room for hope.

Can you identify with Thomas? Have confusion and grief raised a lot of unanswered questions for you? Are you having a hard time believing anything good at this point in your life? Do you struggle to be around others, preferring to be alone to sort things out? It is not a pleasant time for you or those around you, is it?

What do you do when faith is a struggle? Do you give up and accept that awful empty feeling deep inside? I don’t think so and neither would Thomas. As a matter of fact, Thomas would tell you that it is possible to work through your struggle and construct a meaningful, vibrant faith. He did. The highest compliment paid Jesus came from Thomas just days after declaring his unbelief when he shouted, “My Lord and my God.” No one in all the gospels called Jesus God. This was the highest affirmation of faith voiced by anyone.

What can Thomas teach us this morning about faith struggles? What do you think he would recommend for those trying to construct or reconstruct their faith? I’ll share with you what I learned from him this week.

Admit that you are struggling with your faith. Verbalize what it is that you do not believe. Thomas did. “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.” Give voice to your doubts. Identify them. By all means don’t deny them.

Accept the fact that others may not struggle as you do. Don’t envy someone whose faith comes easier than yours nor compare yourself with them. You don’t share the same experiences nor do you have the same understanding of life. Your journey is different from theirs and the particulars of your faith will be also. Isn’t this why Paul told his readers to “work out their own salvation with fear and trembling?” The construction of a vital faith is work and no one can do it for you. It is a do-it-yourself project that will take time and effort. Just as your doubts are

different from others, so your faith will be different. This is as it should be. For your faith to be genuine, it must be born out of your relationship with God, not someone else's.

Be patient. Spiritual seeds take time to grow. Actually, it will take a lifetime to construct your faith. Every experience will teach you more about God, life and yourself. Be a good student.

Stay connected to others on their spiritual journey. You don't have to believe everything others do to study, worship and pray with them. Don't live under the illusion that you are the only one in your Sunday School class, Bible study or this worship service that is struggling with doubts. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Doubts have a way of isolating us. Evidently they separated Thomas from his support group. This is understandable. Sometimes it is hard to be around people whose faith seems to be neatly packaged. We may feel hypocritical if we don't believe what others in the group do. However, there is great value in maintaining relationships when you are struggling. Whatever you believe or don't believe, you need good friends that love you unconditionally. Don't forget, also, that our faith was forged in community as the early Christians shared what they were learning in an environment of trust and grace. Find friends like this and stay connected to them.

Be open to the presence of Christ in your life. He knows where you are and what you need. In his own time, he will help you. He did Thomas. The week after Jesus first appeared to his disciples in the upper room, he visited them again. Why? Thomas was with them. Jesus returned for one reason and that was to speak to Thomas. He knows where you are, too. Be open to his presence in your life.

Affirm what you believe even with doubts and questions in your mind. Don't wait until all your questions are answered before you believe anything and proclaim it. Jesus died with an unanswered question on his mind, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" What makes you think you will not? We'll all die with questions and take them into eternity where our faith will continue to develop.

Doubt your doubts. I first heard that phrase from my friend Dr. Jim Taylor, President of the University of the Cumberlands. He used that phrase while talking to the trustees after his only son, a high school senior, died in a tragic car wreck. "I have learned to doubt my doubts, not my faith," he said. "Why should we believe our doubts and let them control us?" Good advice.

A study of this passage must ask why John shows so much interest in Thomas and includes this story at this place in the gospel. The answer is intriguing, I believe.

Thomas plays a prominent role in the fourth gospel, much more than the other three. When Jesus informed the disciples he was going to Bethany after Lazarus became ill and died, Thomas knew this would cost Jesus his life. The authorities were already seeking him and would easily find him if he went this close to Jerusalem. Even so, it was Thomas that said to the other disciples, "Let us go die with him" John 11:16. Thomas' loyalty could not be questioned.

When Jesus tried to prepare his disciples for his death and comfort them, he said, "I am going to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you may also be where I am. You know the way to the place I am going." Again, it was Thomas who candidly spoke up and said, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" John 14:3-5. Thomas' honesty was not in doubt.

It is in our text, though, that Thomas receives the most recognition and place of prominence in the gospel. The last story John tells is about Thomas and the last words of a disciple are his. This is significant. Religious writers want to end their work with a strong and persuasive conclusion that leaves readers with a bold challenge. John chose Thomas' post-resurrection experience with Jesus and affirmation of faith to inspire his readers. I think he chose well.

I am aware that the gospel has one more chapter featuring the restoration of Peter, but scholars firmly believe that it was an early addition. As Culpepper writes, "The Gospel of John was apparently composed in several stages over an extended period of time and John 21 was added late in the gospel's composition history by a member of the Johannine school drawing on

Johannine tradition. John 21 serves a vital function, however, because it preserves the tradition of an appearance of Jesus in Galilee, records the restoration of Peter and clarifies the role of Peter and the Beloved Disciple.” Nonetheless, many interpreters believe the gospel ended with John 20:30-31. “Jesus did many other miraculous 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 Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you may have life.”

Let’s return to the previous question. **Why did John show so much interest in Thomas?** Why was this incident in Thomas’ life the last entry in the earliest edition of the gospel? John knew there was a little bit of Thomas in every person, at times maybe a lot.

Faith was not easy for Thomas and it won’t be for us. Things will happen we don’t understand. Confusion and grief will cloud our vision. We’ll face intimidating questions and doubts along our spiritual journey. John’s readers near the end of the first century already were and they needed reassurance. In the face of persecution, the early Christians needed to know if Jesus was the risen Lord in whom they should place their confidence and faith. Who better to reassure them than Thomas? What better role model did they need? This was John’s gift to them and I have to believe they appreciated it.

Who better to reassure us than Thomas, the no-nonsense disciple who was candid about his own struggles? What better role model could we have? This was John’s gift to us, too, and I for one am eternally grateful.