

## **“The Struggle of Faith”**

**John 20:24-31**

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I felt a bit uncomfortable. That’s not exactly true. I was very uncomfortable. Last week I went to the grocery store to read the tabloid headlines. I prayed no one would recognize me, especially since I was having a hard time keeping my composure.

I don’t have a Dave Letterman Top Ten, but I’ll give you my some of my favorites. Of course, I must begin with the tabloids’ number one topic.

“Alien mummy goes on rampage.” “Alien zoo animals loose on earth when saucer crash sets bizarre creatures free.” “Aliens travel to earth for Chinese takeout.”

Aliens have nothing on us, though. “Woman delivers her own baby while skydiving.” “Barber bleeds red and white striped blood!” “Boy turns beloved aunt into robot.” “Man with fuzzy slippers creates enough electricity to heat his house.” “Einstein’s brain comes to life and goes on rampage!” “Chickens eat farmer.” “Michael Jackson can hear through his nose.” “Newborn baby bends spoon with his mind.” “Giant earthworms terrorizing Nevada.” “Jimmy Hoffa found in Elvis’ grave!” “Abe Lincoln was the father of professional wrestling.” “Drunken man swallows bowling ball.” “Cannibals order pizza and then eat delivery man!” “Pizza was eaten at the Last Supper.” “Preacher sues surgeons for extracting his soul.” “Congress prepares to repeal the Law of Gravity!”

You can’t read this stuff without laughing. Does anyone take this seriously and believe it? Surely not.

Now you know how Thomas felt after he heard the news of Jesus’ resurrection. This was as believable to him as these bizarre headlines are to us.

You remember Thomas, don’t you? He was the lone holdout on Easter evening when Jesus appeared to the other disciples. Later, when they told him about this experience, he replied, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were and put my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

Jesus must have been aware of Thomas’ skepticism because he appeared a second time and spoke directly to Thomas. “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” Thomas boldly replied, “My Lord and my God!”

I like Thomas. I think he is a good role model for developing and nurturing faith. You might find this rather odd since many people are critical of him, commonly referring to him as Doubting Thomas. I prefer Honest or Courageous Thomas and believe that he can teach us a lot about faith.

I don’t think I am alone in my assessment of Thomas. The most recent Easter message delivered by Pope Benedict XVI was laced with references to Thomas. I’ve heard many of you voice your support for Thomas and it is evident that the evangelist that wrote the gospel of John was impressed with him, too. As a matter of fact, John chose to conclude his book with a story about Thomas, making his bold affirmation of faith the last spoken by a disciple.

I know that our Bible has another chapter beyond this one, but scholars agree this was added by editors that chose not to end the book without redeeming Peter. They did not want Peter to be remembered for his painful and disappointing betrayal of Jesus hours before the crucifixion.

Why did John conclude his portion of this gospel with a story about Thomas? **I believe he wanted to send a clear message to his readers that people serious about their faith will struggle at times.** Without a doubt, his readers were struggling and needed encouragement.

Three generations had passed since Jesus lived. The Romans were still in control. Some of their family members and friends were martyred. Jesus had not returned as many said he would. Doubts were on the increase. Converts were hard to come by. Even the faithful were

struggling with their faith, something they were unprepared for or from which they were growing weary. Did John have a message for them? Yes he did and it came from Thomas, the most vocal skeptic. Jesus is Lord and he helps those whose faith falters.

Speaking of a faltering faith, I think this story raises three questions that need to be addressed. Let me share them with you and some ideas to consider.

**What do people do that struggle with their faith?** I suspect that most of them suffer in silence. If they come to church they don't voice their confusion and doubts out of fear of being criticized, condemned, ridiculed or ostracized. More people than we want to admit stay away from church because they feel uncomfortable. Strong doubts have a way of isolating people.

Perhaps this was why Thomas did not assemble with the disciples on Easter evening. He was in no shape to reveal his true feelings and unsure about what the reaction would be if he did.

On the other hand, we must ask why Thomas was with the disciples the following Sunday? What changed? It appears that the disciples went to him to share their experience with the risen Lord on Easter evening and let him know they wanted him to rejoin them, doubts and all. Evidently Thomas felt loved and safe in their midst.

I wonder how safe people feel at Smoke Rise. Would Thomas feel comfortable here? Is this a place where people are free to ask questions, voice doubts, debate issues and seek truth? I hope so because at times faith is a struggle and we need a safe place to work through our struggles.

I want Smoke Rise to be a place where people can be honest about where they are on their spiritual pilgrimage and find traveling companions that will embrace them. I think I speak for many in saying that at our church we see life and faith as a journey of many experiences and shared stories. Affirming the priesthood of every believer, we believe that all persons have the right to ask their own questions and wrestle with the problems of life in light of their own understanding of scripture and experience. We believe, however, that this is best done in community and therefore, we desire to create a safe place for learning and growing for all that pass our way. We see ourselves as part of the whole Christian church and are eager to form partnerships and enter into dialogue with others on the journey.

Perhaps you are looking for this kind of faith community as you continue your journey. You want to be part of a church where you can ask questions, express doubts, wrestle with tough issues, seek God's will and build authentic faith. You no longer wish to struggle in silence and be isolated from fellow strugglers. I invite you to become a part of this loving fellowship where you will be encouraged to seek to understand and respond to the grace and mercy of God.

Speaking of questions, the second one that this story raises is this. **How does God feel about people whose faith falters?** If Jesus is any indication, He feels a lot of empathy and is moved with compassion. He enters that struggle with them and nurtures them along their way. Isn't this what Jesus did for Thomas?

When the disciples gathered on the Sunday after Easter, Thomas was with them. You recall he was absent when they assembled on Easter. Who else joined them that evening? Jesus did and it appears he returned for one reason, to help Thomas with his struggle.

"Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." Thomas boldly replied, "My Lord and my God!"

You have to be impressed and encouraged by the way Jesus handled Thomas. Look at their conversation. Nowhere does Jesus condemn Thomas for his honesty or criticize him for grappling with his own faith rather than adopting theirs. Instead, he enters that struggle with him and helps him to construct an authentic faith, one filled with peace, power and passion.

I believe Jesus will do the same for us. Somehow I think that Jesus appreciates the struggle of sincere seekers more than the premature answers of unthinking admirers. Don't be afraid to be honest and transparent. Identify your questions, doubts and struggles. They will be safe with him. As Pope Benedict reminded his listeners a few weeks ago, Thomas is a sign for all times that God accepts even those whose faith falters.

So must we, which leads me to ask a final question. **What can we do to help people that are struggling with their faith?** Do the same thing that Jesus did. Show them your wounds.

Thomas' heart melted rather quickly when he saw Jesus' wounds. Unbelief gave way to belief, admiration and awe.

I think the best way to help people that are struggling with their faith is to be as transparent and vulnerable as they are. Show them your wounds. Tell them about your struggles. Describe the obstacles, mistakes, disappointments and challenges you have faced and what you learned from them. Make your scars visible.

Tell those that are struggling about the difference God has made in your life. Tell them how God helped you turn despair into hope, defeat into victory, sorrow into joy, frustration into peace, weakness into strength, guilt into forgiveness, fear into confidence, wandering into direction and death into life. This will do more for your friends that are struggling than all the arguments you could render.

It takes courage to do this, doesn't it? Sometimes it is easier to go along and act as if you have no struggles or criticize those that are not as far along as you. This doesn't help anyone, though, and that was John's message to his readers. He knew they were struggling and he knew who could help them, Thomas and Jesus. I hope you will let them influence you, too.