

DEALING WITH UNBELIEF

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Scripture: John 20: 19-29

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¹⁹ So when it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. The disciples then rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ So Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you." ²² And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained."

²⁴ But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples were saying to him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe."

²⁶ After eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors having been shut, and stood in their midst and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷ Then He said to Thomas, "Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here with your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing." ²⁸ Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed."

I always think that these must have been trying days for Thomas, because in many ways, he was facing a crisis, a trial, because we find that his world must have been turned upside down. The Master whom he had followed for three years suddenly is no more. He has left His family to follow Jesus, and then, to top it all, the ten other disciples say they've seen Him, but he hasn't. And that Jesus has been raised from the dead which he absolutely refuses to believe. I think about him wandering around with that kind of a mindset: I can't believe that Jesus is alive, but these are some of my closest friends. They say they have seen Him. He must have been all upset, very much in a state of crisis.

We often look at Thomas and we attach this particular event to his name. When I was growing up, we had a chorus we used to sing in church that said:

Why worry, when you can pray?
Trust in Jesus, He will be your stay.
Don't be a doubting Thomas,
Rest fully on His promise.
Why worry, worry, worry, worry when you can pray?

There was Thomas tucked in there with doubt. When you thought about Thomas you said 'the doubter'. And yet, as you look around the world, you see many people whose names are Thomas. So it seems that somehow there was redemption beyond this particular incident for him. It seems that Thomas, as he heard what had happened, comes up with an absolute No! I'm not going to believe this.

However, I want us to note one thing that even as Thomas refused to believe what had happened, he did one thing right. He was able to say why and what it would take for him to believe. He wasn't going to believe the disciples, but what he said was that he had to have some kind of an encounter with Jesus for him to believe. That's always a good thing. As we look at many things that confront us every day, we need to be able to look at it through the grid of the Trinity, to be able to make sense or understand whether this is for us or not. And in that particular area, Thomas landed well. He said, "I need to see it directly from Jesus, put my hands in His nail prints, put my hand in His side where the spear went in. Only then will I believe."

Then Jesus shows up and invites him to do that very thing. Scripture doesn't record for us whether he did it or not, but we know his exclamation at that point took away all doubt. He said, "My Lord and my God!" It wasn't a generic proclamation of who Jesus was. It was a proclamation that showed the kind of proximity and relationship that he had with Jesus. "**My** Lord and **my** God!"

Much as I'd like to stay there with Thomas and kind of see how he worked his way through what happened, we don't have anything in scripture that tells us exactly what happened after that, how he responded to Jesus. But the one ingredient that sticks out of this passage is how important faith is for each one of us. How important faith was for Thomas because faith that is seen with the physical eye is not faith.

I remember a song that Simon and Garfunkel used to sing many moons ago. It doesn't say it outright, but for me it has always shown what faith is. It's the song – 'A Bridge over Troubled Water'.

When you're weary, feeling small,
When tears are in your eyes, I'll dry them all.
I'm on your side, oh when times get rough
And friends just can't be found.
Like a bridge over troubled water

That's how I see faith, like a bridge over troubled waters, taking us from this place of disillusionment, this place of adversity, this place of crises to the place of the presence and power of God – this bridge over troubled water. I like to call it faith where we make that move to Him.

2 Corinthians 5:7 says, "For we walk by faith, not by sight."

Hebrews 11:1 "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

Our Christian life is a life of faith. But even if you look beyond our Christian life, every day we live lives of faith. We don't stop in front of a bridge, park the car to the side and say: Let me see the qualifications of the engineer who designed this. Never! We blissfully go on that bridge believing that it's going to hold up, that it is not going to collapse. That's faith. We have faith every day. We use that faith. And sometimes, only when it comes to faith in God do we balk. We take a step back and say: Wait a minute! I can't believe this. I need more tangible evidence.

Right through the bible, the fathers walked by faith. Look at Abraham: "Abraham, get up and move to a land that I will show you", and he gets up and goes; in faith. "Abraham, that son that you have, the one you love, your only son – I want you to sacrifice him," and he does; by faith. Look at Joshua, walking around the walls of Jericho; in faith. I wonder how many taunts came from the wall. "What are you guys doing? You're not saying anything, just walking round and round. Have you lost your way?" Faith. Or look at Ananias. "Ananias, I'm going to send you a man called Saul." "Hang on Lord, from what I've heard, he's the guy who is stoning all the Christians. I can do without this encounter."

But he did encounter. And a Saul became a Paul. Faith! Continuously every day we live our lives in faith.

And as we look at Thomas too, we realize that he was not somebody who was a coward. He was a brave man. He had courage, because you remember when Jesus was going to return to Bethany after hearing that Lazarus was sick, and everybody was saying, "Why are you doing that?" Thomas said, "Let's go with Him so we can die with Him." He was ready to go; that was Thomas. He had this moment of crisis when the one person that he had believed in, followed, was gone. And he stopped and said, "I don't have it, unless I see it." Then he had this wonderful encounter with Jesus.

Very quickly, I want to look at some things that could have played in on this encounter or this time in his life.

1. It seemed that he withdrew from Christian fellowship or from disciple fellowship, because when all the ten met together, Thomas wasn't there. When all the disciples would have been together, Thomas was away by himself. Sometimes I think we miss a great deal when we separate ourselves from Christian fellowship. When we try to fight things by ourselves, we seek to go alone rather than with people and yet, it is in the midst of people that we most often meet Jesus.
2. He refused to go along with the crowd even though there were ten disciples who were vouching the fact that they had seen, he was saying, "Wait a minute. I need an encounter with Jesus." And that is a good thing for us too because the majority doesn't mean it's right, Although the majority has a lot of power. Today what we do need is that when we are faced with many voices speaking of something, we still need to take a step back and go to the One who brings truth into every situation and ask: Is this true, Lord?
3. Once he was convinced, he surrendered completely. My Lord and my God. I wonder whether some of you here are facing a crisis of faith, that something has happened that has brought you to a point where you're not really there. When we look at this life of faith, we see that unbelief is right at the center. And yet, I've always said the integral part of faith is doubt. Faith is moving past doubt and saying, "I don't have all the answers but I'm going to trust the One who does."

When Jesus came down from the mount after his transfiguration, He found His disciples with a large crowd of people. There was a boy who was mute but demon-possessed. His father was asking them to help, but they couldn't do anything. Jesus comes. The father says, "If you are willing, if you can, would you do something?" and Jesus said, "Yes, we can. With God nothing is impossible." Then the man says, "I believe, but help my unbelief." How many of us carry that statement in our lives? I believe that God is sovereign but I have unbelief in this particular situation. I believe that God is omnipotent but I have unbelief in this particular area of my life where I am challenged. I believe but will You help my unbelief?

I looked at some possible ingredients to having trouble with faith and I found that there are one or two things, maybe three.

- You can have a particular disposition that leads to a lack of faith, and this disposition could be one of negativity; maybe the kind of person who may look at a glass and see it as half-empty; more pessimistic, not willing to believe that it is possible that God could do something good for you. That you don't deserve it even. God will come through for others, but not for me. This could be a personality type.

- You tend to isolate yourself when troubles come your way. You try to work them out by yourself. That's how Thomas missed his initial meeting with Jesus. When two or three are gathered together in My name. sometimes when we have a problem, we even stay away from church. We think that once we've figured it all out, we'll come back to church. Maybe church is the answer. Maybe there is one person who got tapped on their shoulder in the morning and told that when you see this person give them a hug. When you see this person, just tell them you are praying for them or pray for them because that's how the body of Christ works.

J.C. Ryle, a great preacher said: How many Christians may lose by not regularly attending gatherings of God's people? You lose when you don't attend the gathering. Hebrews says: "Do not forsake the gathering together" Why? because it is not just what you receive; it's what you give as well. Church is always two-way; you come here to worship but you also come to use the spiritual gifts that God has given to each one of us – to bless, to edify, to encourage one another. That's the role!

What about you this morning, beloved? Has your faith taken a beating? Very often, it is some kind of calamitous event in your life that becomes the catalyst for doubt. It could be like Thomas – the death of his Master. But for you it maybe a relationship that has gone sour. Maybe it's the loss of a friend. Maybe it's the betrayal of somebody close to you. Maybe it's the loss of your job; you haven't had a job for a while. Maybe it is just continuous financial strain on you, month after month, wondering how you're going to make two ends meet. Maybe it's just missed opportunities; they come for everybody but you. Maybe like Samuel Beckett's work 'Waiting for Godot'; you're just waiting and waiting for that moment and it doesn't seem to be coming.

Last night, I was mulling through this sermon, and it suddenly struck me. When we live a life of faith, it's like being in neutral. If you were driving a car or riding a bike, you put the gear in neutral. It doesn't go anywhere; the engine is on, it's working. But then when you rev or step on the gas, the sound comes and it feels like you're doing something but you're not. You're still stationary and it may go for a while because it has momentum, but eventually it will stop because it's in neutral.

I think that's how our life of faith is – we are ticking in terms of being God's children but we're not going anywhere. There isn't any vision, there isn't any purpose. It is just one day, one day, one day. Just go through the motions. But the beauty of this passage is that Jesus didn't leave Thomas there. he revisited the place when Thomas was there and he clarified for Thomas, his doubts.

Beloved, Jesus is doing that still, meeting with each one of us in ways we need to be met, clarifying doubts, and helping us increase faith. Look at what He did when Thomas met Him, how that encounter left Thomas. we read in many passages in Acts of how Thomas was involved in the early church planting. Then we know, as we believe, that he came to India in 58 AD and brought the gospel eastward. Charged up man, filled with purpose, knowing exactly what God wanted of him. And I wonder today whether the faith that you had also informs you of what God wants from you. Or are you drifting? Are you treading water thinking that you're doing something when you are not moving one inch in the direction that God wants you to move?

I wonder today, beloved, how is your faith? Is it a vibrant faith? Is it a faith that is patched into God's will, the power of God, and the purpose of God for you? Or are you in neutral gear, just sitting biding time? I think that's an important question for you, for me because that is not the will of God. The walk of discipleship is always dynamic, never static. Always dynamic! We grow, we move, we do the things that are the will of God. Maybe today is a day that you say you're speaking to me Lord,

because I checked out when that happened in my life. I just go through the motions. Maybe now the Lord is saying to you: That's not My will for you. No, I have a different will and a purpose for you. Will you let faith arise in your heart and in your life? maybe today you're saying yes, that's me. And I really want God to touch me. Maybe you're saying I know it's me, but I don't know if I'm ready.

Famous preacher F.B. Meyer used to say, "When God hears a prayer that says 'I'm not willing, but I'm ready to be made willing.'" Would you pray that? I'm not willing Lord, but I'm ready to be made willing through Your Spirit. Because I know that's where I need to be. Listen to the Spirit of God; the tap on your shoulder could be His, nudge in your heart could be Him saying: I want you back on purpose with renewed faith. Today is your encounter with Me.

Prayer

Amen.