

I Think I Missed It
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John 20:24-29 (The Message)

But Thomas, sometimes called the Twin, one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples told him, "We saw the Master."

But he said, "Unless I see the nail holes in his hands, put my finger in the nail holes, and stick my hand in his side, I won't believe it."

Eight days later, his disciples were again in the room. This time Thomas was with them. Jesus came through the locked doors, stood among them, and said, "Peace to you."

Then he focused his attention on Thomas. "Take your finger and examine my hands. Take your hand and stick it in my side. Don't be unbelieving. Believe."

Thomas said, "My Master! My God!"

Jesus said, "So, you believe because you've seen with your own eyes. Even better blessings are in store for those who believe without seeing."

One of my daughter's favorite books growing up was "A Bridge to Terabithia" by Katherine Peterson. I remember when, as a young child, she brought the book to me and asked me to read it.

I think it must be a nostalgia thing, but I decided I wanted to read the book again this week.

It is the story of Jess Aarons, a shy self-conscious eleven-year-old boy from a poor and fundamentalist Christian family in rural Virginia, and the friendship that he develops with Leslie Burke --- who is the exact opposite of Jess.

Leslie is filled with a gregarious spirit and imagination and sees life as one big adventure after another.

They become great friends and create an imaginary world known as Terabithia.

Jess tells Leslie that they go to church on Easter, and Leslie surprises him by asking if she can go with them.

She has never been to church, and she wonders what it is all about.

Jess is bewildered and wonders why anyone would want to go to church if they did not have to.

But he succeeds in persuading his mother to let Leslie go with them --- provided that Leslie doesn't embarrass her --- which was her biggest concern.

On the way home from the Easter Church service, Leslie, Jess, and his sister May Belle are in the back of the pickup truck and she shares that she was glad she came along, despite the hellfire and brimstone preaching and declares:

"I'm really glad I came . . . That whole Jesus thing. It's really interesting."

May Belle pipes in and tries to correct Leslie: "It's not interesting. It is scary. It's nailing holes through your hand. . . . It's because we are all vile sinners that God made Jesus die."

Leslie was overwhelmed by her response and says: "Do you really think that's true?"

Jess was shocked. "It's in the Bible, Leslie."

May Belle says: "You gotta believe the Bible, Leslie"

"Why?", she asks

"Cause if you don't believe the Bible" -- May Belle's eyes were huge --- "God'll damn you to hell when you die."

"I don't believe it," Leslie said and then she added "I don't think you've even read the Bible."

I don't believe it either --- and that is where the problem lies

The reality is --- we all have doubts.

Even if we have read the whole bible --- there are parts that just don't seem to make sense

and other parts that seem to say one thing and then later say the exact opposite

In her book *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*, Rachel Held Evans --- you had to know I would quote her somehow this week --- wrote:

If you are looking for verses with which to support slavery, you will find them. If you are looking for verses with which to abolish slavery, you will find them. If you are looking for verses with which to oppress women, you will find them. If you are looking for verses with which to liberate or honor women, you will find them. If you are looking for reasons to wage war, you will find them. If you are looking for reasons to promote peace, you will find them. If you are looking for an outdated, irrelevant ancient text, you will find it. If you are looking for truth, believe me, you will find it.

This is why there are times when the most instructive question to bring to the text is not what does it say? But what am I looking for? I suspect Jesus knew this when he said, "ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened." If you want to do violence in this world, you will always find the weapons. If you want to heal, you will always find the balm.

The late Charles Ryrie, was a teacher at Dallas Theological Seminary and taught the theology of dispensationalism; he put together a study bible that highlights in various colors his interpretation of major Christian doctrines.

In other words, every passage of the bible is color coded that allows readers to identify quickly and easily twelve major themes of Scripture throughout the text: God, discipleship, love, faith, sin, evil, salvation, family, outreach, commandments, history, and prophecy.

Someone in the Monday morning Bible Study has one of these very bright bibles and they shared that when Thomas acknowledges his doubt that it is colored as a sin.

I find that fascinating --- that we have often equated doubt with sin.

Why do we do that?

Why do we believe that to question your beliefs is a SIN?

Rachel Held Evans addressed this when she wrote:

It's a frightful thing - thinking you have to get God right in order to get God to love you, thinking you're always one error away from damnation. It's a kind of legalism, really... How ironic. The very condition of humanity is to be wrong about God. The moment we figure God out, God ceases to be God. Maybe it's time to embrace the mystery and let ourselves off the hook.

But what is even more fascinating, is if you look carefully at the Greek here in John 20, Jesus never tells Thomas not to doubt and he certainly never suggests that he is a sinner for his questions.

In Matthew 14, when Peter tries to walk on water and sinks, Jesus, reaching out his hand saves him and says, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

But in John 20, when Jesus and Thomas meet in the upper room, Jesus lets Thomas touch his hands, feet and side and then says, "Don't be without belief, rather believe."

As I have shared during this look at John's Gospel: --- for the author of John, belief isn't about an intellectual assent to some list of facts, but instead, belief is about relationship.

When Jesus died on the cross, in many ways, so too did his relationship with Thomas.

Thomas believed Jesus, he gave him his heart and his hope, and the reality is --- that belief couldn't live beyond the grave.

Unless, of course, Jesus lived beyond the grave, and that is so hard to fathom!

Is it surprising that Thomas wanted proof before he handed his heart over risking that it might be burned again?

I've always felt bad for Thomas.

He was asked to do what the other disciples didn't have to do.

He had to believe sight unseen.

Probably any of the others would have had the same struggle.

Remember the Easter story --- after Jesus has appeared to Mary in the garden, he goes to the room where the rest of his disciples are holed up. And they're afraid.

Suddenly Jesus appears, despite the locked doors, and they can see the wounds in his hands and his side.

And Jesus says, "peace be with you".

And they believe.

But one disciple was missing.

And, if I am honest, this disciple would probably be me.

Thomas wasn't there when Jesus came back.

Maybe he was at the store.

Maybe he was running late after work.

Maybe he was stuck in traffic.

For whatever reason, Thomas arrives, and all the other disciples tell him Jesus was just here.
I'll bet they even said to him something like, "Thomas, you won't believe this!"

And he doesn't. Thomas tells them, "Unless I see it for myself, and can touch his wounds, I won't believe."

Have you ever wondered how Thomas must have felt right then?

Were the disciples' pranksters, just playing a joke on him?

Or were they telling the truth, and if so, why hadn't Jesus stayed around for him to see him too? All he knew was that the other ten remaining disciples were in on something, and he wasn't.

And yet, we all know Thomas as "doubting Thomas".

I wonder how long after this happened did it take for the other disciples to start to call him that. "Oh, that's doubting Thomas. Jesus had to come and let him touch his hands before he believed."

But that is all of us --- we all have our doubts. And the important question is not how do we deny our doubts, but rather how do we grow from them.

Let me offer three simple steps that can help us as we deal with our doubts

1. Ask Questions

If our faith can't handle the questions --- it is a weak faith indeed

Jesus tells us his stories in parables which are told in such a way as to invoke questions (and more than one answer)

2. Acknowledge your doubts

Own it!

3. Be Patient

Through prayer and study our doubts can grow into --- not certainty --- for there always is doubt -- but into great faith

Faith and doubt are NOT the opposite

I would suggest that they are totally and necessarily compatible

Let me close with this thought from Richard Rohr.

I believe too often we think we need to KNOW everything.

We try to get it all in our heads and forget about our hearts.

The key is accepting we cannot ever fully know --- and allow ourselves to become comfortable in the questions.

I see mystery not as something you cannot understand; rather, it is something that you can endlessly understand! There is no point at which you can say, "I've got it." Always and

forever, mystery gets you! In the same way, you don't hold God in your pocket; rather, God holds you and knows your deepest identity.

When we describe God, we can only use similes, analogies, and metaphors. All theological language is an approximation, offered tentatively in holy awe. We can say, "It's like . . ." or "It's similar to . . ."; but we can never say with absolute certainty, "It is . . ." because we are in the realm of beyond, of transcendence, of mystery. We absolutely must maintain humility before the Great Mystery; otherwise, religion worships itself and its formulations instead of God.