

Doubters, Failures, and other Model Christians

A sermon on John 20: 19-31 by Nathan Nettleton, 3 April 2016

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Message

Doubts and questions, far from being a threat to faith in the risen Christ, are its normal starting point and constant companion.

Sermon

Somewhat unfairly, the Apostle Thomas is more famous for his alleged doubts than he is for anything else. So much so that we give his name to anyone who raises serious doubts about what others are believing. It hardly seems fair since he was the only one of the disciples who hadn't been there when Jesus first appeared to them, so who knows how many of the others would have reacted just the same if they had similarly only had the word of others to go on. The others had heard the testimony of Mary Magdalene and they hadn't believed her, so why do we pick on Thomas for treating their account with the same scepticism that everyone else had treated hers.



And yet, it is the case that even after Thomas falls to his knees before Jesus and confesses him both Lord and God, Jesus contrasts his need of physical proof with the blessedness of those who believe without the need of such proof. Of course, the gospel writer is emphasising this point because he is writing to the next generation, people like us who have no such opportunity to see and feel the physical wounded hands for themselves. John is saying that this does not put you at any significant disadvantage. Blessed are you if you hear the testimony and believe and follow Jesus. Indeed says John, at the end of the reading we heard, this is precisely why I have written this account of the story of Jesus, so that you may believe and have life in his name.

But I want to note something else here. If we wanted to be really harsh in our judgement of Thomas, we could say that he is the first person to refuse the testimony of the early church. The disciples testified to their encounter with the risen Christ, and Thomas rejected their testimony. Some church people would have you think that he should therefore have been kicked out of the community of the believers. They would say that the presence of such scepticism and resistance to the truth is a contaminant that threatens the health of the body and must be expelled. But that is not the message of the gospel. A week later, with all his doubts intact, Thomas is still with them, still an accepted member of the community of disciples. Jesus makes himself known again, and although the offer to touch the wounds is made, Thomas no longer seems to need it. He just falls to his knees and confesses Jesus as Lord and God. John's gospel had opened by telling us that Jesus was the Word and that the Word was God, and here at the end of John's account, Thomas is the first person to recognise that and name Jesus as God. Hardly something that justifies us labelling him as "the doubter" for the rest of eternity! But more importantly, imagine if the early church had been so hung up on everyone believing the same thing in the same way that they written Thomas off as a faithless unbeliever and a bad example to others and kicked him out.

Unfortunately, that is just what a lot of churches from that day to this would have done and often have done. Far too often we have gotten hung up on trying to work out who is up to standard, good enough or correct enough or unquestioning enough, to be accepted into our supposedly perfect little holy huddles. But when we do that, we are seriously missing the point of what Jesus was on about and we are a long long way from following his example. Again, let's stop singling out Thomas as the bad boy, and look at the rest of the group and how Jesus responded to them.

When Jesus had been in the most trouble and was most in need of friends to stick by him, the whole group of disciples had abandoned him. Every last one of them had turned tail and run. Peter had even denied ever having known Jesus. And at the start of tonight's story, despite Mary Magdalene's report of having seen Jesus alive, they are all in hiding, grief-stricken, afraid for their own safety, feeling as guilty as hell, and a long long way from believing that there was another chapter to come in the Jesus story. So when Jesus suddenly appears in their midst, many of us Christians who are rather too confident that we'd have been so much better fully expect that Jesus should castigate them all for giving up on him and sack the lot of them. "Fair-weather friends! Where were you when I needed you? Get out of my sight! I'm going to replace the lot of you with some better quality disciples who will stick with me when the going gets tough." That's certainly what a lot of us Christians would have said. Only the best are good enough for us. But not, it seems, for Jesus. What does he say. "Good to see you all. Peace be with you." "Peace be with you. You're my team and I still want you to be my representatives in the world, to show the world my love and forgiveness."

And if you think that's crazy on Jesus's part, he's not finished yet. Some time later when Jesus wants someone to be his number one ambassador in taking the message of love and forgiveness beyond Israel and out into the gentile world, who does he choose? Saul of Tarsus. His violent sworn enemy. The zealous fundamentalist who already has the blood of some of Jesus's first messengers on his hands. It seems that Jesus doesn't just love his enemies. He welcomes them onto his team and offers them top jobs. In some of our churches it seems that it is very hard for anyone to ever be seen as good enough to really be accepted and trusted, but with Jesus himself, it seems that no one is bad enough to be cast aside. No matter how much you've failed, or how much you doubt, or who you've betrayed, or how much suffering you are responsible for, Jesus is standing there, reaching out to you with wounded hands and saying, "Geez it's good to see you. Peace be with you. Love to have you on board."

What Jesus looks for is neither reliable good behaviour, nor a doubt-free system of beliefs. It is a real mistake to imagine that faith in Jesus is about meticulously avoiding sins or about unquestioningly believing certain doctrines or facts about him. Faith in Jesus is about following him, about throwing in our lot with him and going wherever that leads. Like Thomas, many of us do that with all sorts of unresolved intellectual doubts about who Jesus is and about the historical or doctrinal content of the stories about him. Jesus is not the least bit threatened by such doubts, and neither need we be, as his church.

Faith in Jesus is not about eliminating doubts, let alone about ridding our community of the doubters. Faith in Jesus is about honestly facing our doubts and choosing to commit ourselves to following Jesus anyway. John did not close this passage by saying I have written this down "so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and be accepted for the correctness of your doctrine." Rather, he said I have written this down "so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing

you may have life in his name.” It is the living of the life that counts, and like Thomas and Peter and Paul, the doubters and the betrayers and even the persecutors are welcome to get on board that life with us, for in the midst of that living, the risen Christ is seen and known.

There is another question I want to ask about Thomas before we finish. As well as thinking we’ve been unfair to saddle him forever with the “doubting” tag, I suspect that we might also have misunderstood what it was that he was doubting. Perhaps we share a lot more of his doubts than we realise. It is so common in today’s scientific age to doubt the possibility of anyone being raised from the dead, that we tend to assume that that was the obstacle for Thomas. But actually, in the context of John’s account of the Jesus story, that seems unlikely. You see, in this gospel account, the last thing that happens before Jesus arrives in Jerusalem for the last time is that he raises Lazarus from the dead. And Thomas was there. So, if he has just seen Jesus raise someone from the dead, why would he find it impossible to believe that God could raise Jesus from the dead?

Perhaps his doubts are not about whether God *can* raise someone from the dead. Perhaps they are really about whether God *would* raise a failed messiah, an executed loser. Sure God might raise a real messiah, but surely Jesus’s brutal death proved that he was not the messiah they had hoped for. The messiah was supposed to crush the foreign occupation forces and expel them from Israel. If Jesus was himself crushed beneath the grinding wheels of their ruthless oppression, and strung up for a gruesome public death like so many failed messiahs before him, then clearly Jesus was not God’s anointed one after all.

No wonder Thomas reckoned he would need to see Jesus’ hands and feet and side. He needed to see the marks of execution. Not to be sure that God *could* raise a dead man, but to be sure that God *would* raise this particular dead man. You see, this makes one hell of a difference, precisely because faith in Jesus is not just believing facts, but following in his footsteps. The disciples had all thought that following in Jesus’s footsteps seemed like a great idea when they thought he was going to be the conquering messiah who would call down legions of angels and defeat their enemies. But when you’ve just watched him follow through on his words about loving your enemies instead, and you’ve seen him get himself beaten up and brutally executed for his troubles, then following in his footsteps doesn’t look like nearly such a good idea after all.

Perhaps Thomas doubts that this could really be the executed Jesus because he knows exactly what that would mean. That would mean that God is not the crusading warrior that we had imagined. That would mean that God is not a fiery demanding judge who only accepts those who make the least mistakes in behaviour, practice or belief. When Thomas falls to his knees and acknowledges as his God not the one who wields the greatest force, but the one who suffers before it, his whole world has been turned on its head. We face the same challenge. Jesus is not nearly so concerned with whether you can intellectually believe in a resurrection from the dead as he is with whether you will follow him in trusting the power of love to prevail in the face of insane hatred and violence. Call me ‘Nathan the Doubter’ if you will, but I know that I find it easier to believe in a bodily resurrection than to imagine facing a mob of ISIS terrorists who seem to enjoy crucifying people and turning down the opportunity to call on a legion of SAS troops to deal with them.

The risen Jesus sounds very comforting and reassuring when he says, “Peace be with you!” But what’s the very next thing he says? “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” We’ve just

seen how and where Jesus was sent. "So I send you!" Thomas' doubts start to look awfully sensible. But Jesus is reaching out to us too to embrace us with his wounded hands and breathe into us the warm breath of his love and forgiveness. And when we too know ourselves beloved and healed and held, and we fall to our knees and recognise the perfect image of God in the mangled victim of our violence, we too will be raised to new life and find a whole new world opening up before us, a world of new life and love into which we doubters and betrayers and guilty failures are all invited to walk together, in the footsteps of Jesus, as the beloved people of God.