

Rethinking Doubting Thomas

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning. It's so good to be with all of you. Such looks of expectancy on your faces.! So good to be with you here this morning, to be able to be home in our home church with all of you.

We have been traveling a lot over the last few weeks. We were in Montana visiting a church last weekend. First time in Montana. And let me tell you, if there is a competition for church visits, the amount of physical activity we do on those church visits, the folks in Montana win hands down. Within about an hour of us landing in Montana, we were hiking to the top of Mount Helena. And then the next day, we were supposed to have a series of meetings with key leaders at the church. And they said, why don't we do those meetings while mountain biking in the mountains? And we said, that would be great. And so we mountain biked through Butte, Montana, having in-depth, intense conversations as we went. It was wonderful.

And yeah, we feel like we survived and had a wonderful time. So as you know, we have been navigating both the last six months in my new role as bishop, also for Alicia and me as empty nesters. We're now six or seven months into being truly empty nesters. We have found, though, that with kids that have technically left the house, we still do a fair amount of sort of parenting from a distance.

Lots of texts come our way. Especially we notice their freshman year, trying to figure out doing things for the first time, even filling out official forms that you've never had to fill out before and figuring out how do we answer this. I know of one mom, this wasn't one of our kids, thankfully, but I know of one mom whose son went to college as a freshman, had to fill out one of those official forms. It asked for his emergency contact, and he wrote, mom. Underneath it, it said relationship, followed by a blank space, and he wrote, good.

So continue to pray for us as empty nesters.

[2 : 1 8] Two Sundays ago, we celebrated Easter together, and I don't know about you, but I always find the move from Lent into Easter as a little bit of a shock, especially if you're here for the Easter vigil, coming from the darkness of Lent, six weeks of deprivation, and moving into repentance, and a soberness of the season. That first move into Easter is a little bit of a shock, and I feel caught off guard, and it takes a minute to catch up. And if you feel that way about Easter as well, then this morning's gospel reading from John is for you, because it's the story of one disciple who, amidst all the joys of Easter morning, is not quite ready to celebrate yet, and has a very different reaction to news about the resurrection than all of the other disciples do.

Three weeks ago, Alicia and I were watching the NCAA basketball tournament. We had filled out our brackets, and we are big college basketball fans in our household. The problem with that is that Alicia was an undergrad at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, and I was a grad student at Duke. And it means during basketball season, there's a little bit of tension in our household. And we were watching the fourth round, the Elite Eight, to determine who was going to the final four. I had picked Duke in my bracket to win, and for those of you that watched the tournament, you know that Duke was playing UConn, seemed to have it in control for the entire length of the game until the final few minutes, and everything fell apart. And with 0.4 seconds left on the time, a freshman from UConn shot from just past half court, and it swished through, and unbelievably, UConn won. They beat Duke in a major upset. Now, if there is one thing that my wife, who graduated from the University of North Carolina, loves, she loves Carolina winning a basketball game. But a very, very close second for her that she absolutely loves is Duke losing any basketball game. And when that basket went through the rim, my wife began hooping and hollering and jumping up and down and pounding on pillows and texting all of her friends in Carolina. And she kept this up until, to her credit, she looked at me. And she said, I'm so sorry.

And for the next few hours, maybe the next couple of days, I have a lot emotionally invested in these things, we had a note of dissonance in our household because we responded to the very same news in very different ways. And in this morning's gospel reading from John, we encounter one disciple who reacts to the same news that the other disciples heard, and he reacts in a very different way. And it creates this note of dissonance. Like right in the middle of this text, John 20 is a really like exuberant passage.

It is celebrating the resurrection of Jesus. And you've got Mary, Mary Magdalene going to the tomb in the morning, and she thinks that she's talking to the gardener, and then she realizes it's Jesus. [6:12] And she runs back and she tells the other disciples. And then later in the chapter, the disciples have gathered that Sunday evening after the resurrection in an upper room, and Jesus appears in their midst, and they see him, and they talk to him, and he blesses them, and he gives them the Holy Spirit, and they're filled with joy and exuberance.

And right in the middle of all of this joy, John drops this other account into the middle of things. It seems like this story of joy might continue, but Thomas wasn't in the room, and so they come to him to tell him the good news, and they say, Thomas, we've seen the Lord. And they expect, and we expect as readers, for Thomas to be overjoyed as well. That's what all the momentum is, except that he isn't. Thomas, it turns out, is not going to believe something, based on someone else's experience. And so, verse 25 says, Thomas says to them, 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'm not going to believe.

Now, let's pause for a moment. The response to Thomas throughout history has been almost universally negative. Thomas doesn't believe, and so he's viewed as lacking faith, or being out of step, or being spiritually deficient in some way. What is he known as throughout history?

[7:59] Doubting Thomas. How would you like to go through life? Instead of Pastor Thomas. Instead of Father Thomas. Doubting Thomas.

If that is what you are known as throughout history. But I think those assessments are wrong. And in fact, the church fathers and the earliest commentators on this passage did not view Thomas in this way. In fact, they believe that John, in writing his gospel, very intentionally and strategically included this account, this story, right in the middle of these resurrection appearances.

With all the awkwardness, with all the dissonance, he did it very, very intentionally. Because, they said, John believed that most people are going to respond to news about Jesus' resurrection the way that Thomas did.

They're going to be skeptical. They're going to ask questions. Most people don't immediately respond the way that Peter did, or Mary Magdalene did, who see resurrection, who see evidence of the resurrection, and they run back and they tell everyone else about it. Most people, John thought, respond the way that Thomas did.

And so, he includes the story of Thomas because he wants future readers to be able to find themselves in the story. He wants us to be able to find ourselves in this story.

[9:47] There is a wonderful book by Janet Hagberg called *The Critical Journey*. And she talks about the process of spiritual growth and how it happens. And she says we might be tempted to think that the story of spiritual growth is one about kind of constant and incremental progress.

By doing lots of the right things, by learning how to pray, by going to church, by doing all kinds of activities that are part of a spiritual journey. And, of course, those are one part of the story.

But she says that the most important part of spiritual growth, something that is like rocket fuel for spiritual growth, is something that she calls disruptions.

And disruptions are things that occur in our life which do not fit the narrative. They do not fit our plans. They do not fit our expectations.

And they force us to go on an inward journey that we did not plan on going on. They force us to look for answers that we do not possess or for resources that I look around and I say I do not have access to these resources that I need right now to respond to what has come into my life.

[11:05] And I think that the story we have heard read this morning is not actually about doubt. It is about disruption. And so perhaps we shouldn't be calling Thomas doubting Thomas.

Maybe we should call him honest Thomas. Thomas. Because, to his credit, Thomas does not just go along to get along.

There must have been, I would think, tremendous pressure for Thomas to at least feign enthusiasm. To simply accept what his friends were saying.

We know from our own experience that there is tremendous pressure to believe whatever our social circles believe or whatever our particular spheres of influence are. But even at the risk of being misunderstood, Thomas responds to this news not so much with doubt but with honesty.

Because he is experiencing something that is a disruption in his life. And so if Janet Hagberg in her book is right, if disruptions are one of the primary forces for spiritual growth in our life, then we should learn to pay more attention to them.

[12 : 34] And perhaps not lose out on the opportunities that they present. Sometimes those disruptions are intellectual. It's clear that Thomas, in our passage this morning, he's having an intellectual disruption.

Because while first century Jews believed that there would be a general resurrection of faithful Israel at the end of history, they had no frameworks, no conceptions of one person being raised from the dead in the middle of history.

And so when his friends, who he otherwise trusts, come and present him this new information to tell him something that doesn't fit his intellectual framework, there's a crisis that gets introduced into Thomas' world.

Several months ago, I sat on our sofa with a college student who was not a Christian but was an honest spiritual seeker. And he was seeking because as a young adult, he was starting to become awake to the fact that the false promises of the world, consumerism or pleasure or just the kind of dopamine distractions of modern life, they were not delivering its promise.

And he was becoming awake to their deficiencies. And this awakening was creating some disruption in his life.

[13 : 58] And he had not really taken the claims of religion seriously before. But in looking, in being forced to go on a journey that he did not plan to go on, he was beginning to look at broader claims.

And we sat there in our living room and we talked for an hour and a half about some of the most serious intellectual conversations and discussions and questions that one can have about Jesus and the meaning of life and all of the central things that necessarily come up as we're considering those kinds of things.

It's worth noting that intellectual disruption is not just for those who are not yet Christians and thinking about it. Intellectual disruption happens for those of us who have been raised in the church. And at certain seasons of life, we find that the answers we were given or the answers we've settled on are no longer adequate to the answers that we are confronting, either in ourselves or that friends or neighbors or others are bringing to us.

And we find ourselves even later in life, even later in our Christian journey, having to deal with intellectual disruption. And the church should be a place where people can go on that journey.

[15 : 12] And to engage with the intellectual disruptions that occur even later in life. Sometimes disruptions are not intellectual so much as they're experiential.

I'm reading a fascinating book by an author, fascinating writer, Barbara Ehrenreich. She's most well known for her book *Nickel and Dimed* on Not Getting By in America.

She died just a few years ago. She was a committed atheist. But about 10 years ago, she wrote a memoir that I'm reading right now. It's called *Living with a Wild God*, in which she tries to make sense of a whole series of profound mystical experiences.

She started having around the age of 17. And it continued for several years after that. And her book attempts, it recounts her attempt, now as an adult, going back and reading her journals from that era and trying to make sense of what was happening.

And what's interesting is that although she doesn't end up moving from her basic position as an atheist, she does not discount or psychologize those experiences.

[16 : 27] But she ends up arguing that there is a much larger reality that is bigger and deeper and more mysterious than we think.

And in the book, she takes the task, the scientific rationalism of the world in which we live that does not take proper account of mystical or spiritual or religious experiences that a significant percentage of the population claims to have.

She argues that many people are having disruptions in their lives, this inbreaking in their world that are mystical or spiritual in origin, and we should learn to pay attention to them and figure out what to

do with them.

Sometimes the disruptions in our lives are not intellectual or experiential so much as they are circumstantial. The writer C.S. Lewis writes about the changes in his life as he cared for his wife, Joy Gresham, as she died at an early age from cancer, and as he tries to make sense of her suffering and the loss, he writes in his book, *A Grief Observed*, that there was a softening of his heart and an ability to become more emotionally vulnerable and to live in greater love with those around him as a result of this disruption.

He writes, God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain. And the crises that come in loss, whether it's the unexpected loss of a job or a failed relationship or a bad health report, these are disruptions that if we can pay attention to them, if we can somehow wrestle with them and receive them, they can lead us into a deeper journey that we didn't plan to go on.

[18:19] What do we do when disruption occurs? It's interesting that in this moment of disruption for Thomas, and he expresses his need for Jesus.

He says, I need to see and experience this for myself. It's interesting that it doesn't happen right away. Jesus does not respond right away. Even though Jesus appears to be all over the place, he's showing up to other disciples.

First Corinthians, Paul writes that Jesus showed himself after his resurrection to over 500 people. Everyone else seems to be seeing Jesus, but despite Thomas' desire to see Jesus for himself, Jesus doesn't show up right away.

And I wonder if Thomas was tempted to get stuck. I wonder if he was tempted to just give up. Because that is a temptation. When we enter into seasons of disruption, the emotional requirements of having to go in search of new or better or deeper answers, or the fear of leaving what is known and comfortable can sometimes just leave us there for longer than we would like, and we get stuck.

[19:44] And I wonder. Thomas expresses this need. There's no Jesus. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday goes by of that week. And I wonder if he was just tempted to give up.

But what does he do? He decides to exercise some agency.

And he decides to visit the last place that he'd heard Jesus had been. Jesus had appeared to the other disciples the previous Sunday in an upper room.

And so the next Sunday, Thomas shows up there too. He shows up with no guarantees that Jesus is going to be there.

There's no advance warning. But rather than allow his experience of the previous week to drive him into passivity, he goes searching for Jesus. And he shows up at the last place that he knew he was.

[20:44] And there he finds him. Verse 26 says that a week later, his disciples were in the house again, and this time Thomas was with him.

Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, Peace be with you.

And then without wasting any time, he goes right to Thomas. And he says, Put your finger here.

See my hands. Reach out your hand. Put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe. And Thomas said to him, My Lord and my God. No matter where we are at in our spiritual journey, no matter how stuck we might feel, whether we're facing disruption or not, whether we're feeling stuck or not, a good question we can always ask is the question that Thomas asked.

How do I put myself in a place where Jesus might show up? What is the smallest step that I can take towards Jesus, whatever that might be?

And then trust that in Jesus' way, in Jesus' timing, he'll show up. This morning we are going to confirm some folks, a lot of folks.

[22:14] Teenagers, adults. And confirmation is a service in which we take a step towards Jesus. Confirmation is a service in being confirmed.

In being confirmed, we're saying that the vows that I made at my baptism or the vows that were made on my behalf, I'm now claiming those vows in a new way, in a more self-conscious way. Confirmation, it's a step towards God. It's a chance to say, I want to be a part of what God's doing in the world. I want to join God in his project of bringing healing and repair and redemption to all things.

I want to be a part of that. And so as we lay hands on those who are going to be confirmed here this morning, as we ask the Holy Spirit to empower them to be the hands and feet of Jesus in the world,

it's also an opportunity for all of us to open our own hearts to God and to invite him to do that in us as well.
Amen.