

"Doubting" Thomas

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Date: 03 April 2016

[0:00] Thomas said to them, Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

So the Apostle Thomas really got kind of a bummer of a deal. He's gone down in our memories as Doubting Thomas. And that's some pretty seriously bad press, because that is only part of the story. You know, after the Spirit came at Pentecost, Thomas undoubtedly joined with the rest of the Apostles in the mission of taking the Gospel to the whole world. In fact, according to tradition, Thomas took the Gospel to India, and died there as a Christian martyr. Now when we start talking about doubt, I think we have to specify that there are different varieties of doubt. The first thing that probably comes to mind is a sort of stubborn refusal to believe. We think of that as a kind of skepticism or cynicism. But I'm not sure that that can really apply to Thomas, because he had seen the power of God firsthand. He had seen the miracles of Jesus. He had sat under the teaching of Jesus. He knew the power of God. He even had firsthand knowledge of Jesus raising someone from the dead. So it's not as though he thought that sort of thing was impossible. So it would seem that doubting God's power isn't precisely what's going on with Thomas. So what was it? Well, I tend to think that it's most likely that Thomas was dealing with the kind of doubt that arises from a place of deep hurt and deep disappointment. Thinking on the death of Jesus, he probably wondered why God would allow such an awful thing to happen. Many of us, if we're being honest, have been there at some point.

Now, as many of you know, I was an Army National Guardsman for almost seven years. It might be hard for you to imagine your priest in basic training, but I assure you it did happen. And the memories good and bad stick with me. Like the time, for example, a gigantic drill sergeant picked me up by my shirt collar and screamed in my face. Of course, I only weighed in a whopping 138 pounds at the time, but it was still pretty dramatic. Now, that being said, I remember one of my drill sergeants very fondly.

His name was Drill Sergeant Lockhart, and he, for some reason, took a particular liking to me. And because when I was an enlisted soldier, I served as a chaplain assistant, he took to calling me chappy. On one occasion, extraordinarily pleased with my performance, he said, outstanding, Evans.

Did the Lord teach you that? To which I said, the Lord taught me everything I know, drill sergeant. Now, one day in training, most of my platoon had gone to exchange their damaged uniforms for new ones.

[3:38] Because a couple of us didn't have any damaged uniforms to exchange, we stayed behind in the barracks to clean our weapons. And our drill sergeant stayed behind in the barracks with us. And we were talking pretty casually, more so than you usually talk with your drill sergeant, when he said to me, you know, I have a hard time believing in God after some of the awful things that I've seen.

Now, he was an infantryman, and had done some pretty intense combat tours. This was circa 2007, so that was kind of right in the thick of it.

Now, he went on to tell me about a baby girl that his unit had found. Her parents had been killed by militants, and she had basically been left to die. By the time they found her, she was severely dehydrated.

They tried their best to save her, but they couldn't. As he told me the story, it became pretty clear to me that he was dealing with the kind of doubt that comes from a place of deep hurt.

He was wondering how God could have allowed something like that to happen. Now, my senior year of high school, when I was still a fairly new believer, I ended up being faced with a similar question, as I was confronted with a tragedy that I couldn't quite process.

[5:02] One of my best friends unexpectedly and tragically passed away. It was absolutely crushing. You know, T. Andrew does not expect that he's going to be a pallbearer for one of his friends, but it happened.

I found myself asking God, why? Why did that happen? In our gospel lesson for this morning, we get the sense that Thomas didn't know how to process the agonizing death of Jesus, and so he didn't know how to process the news of his resurrection.

Tragedy had had the effect on Thomas that it can often have on people who are hurting. It drove him to doubt.

So what does Thomas say? Unless I see in his hand the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.

Well, what ends up happening in the story? He sees in the hands of Jesus the mark of the nails, he places his finger into the mark of the nails, and he places his hand into his side.

[6:20] Jesus lovingly shows himself to Thomas to give him what is required for his doubt to become faith.

And so Thomas believes. Why? Because he had encountered the risen Christ. He had seen the risen Christ and known the risen Christ.

And that made all the difference. Look at it another way. What was the answer to Thomas' doubts? Isn't the answer nothing other than Christ himself risen from the dead? The resurrection is the answer to Thomas' doubts about the resurrection.

The resurrection. The resurrection is the answer to the agonizing death that Thomas' Lord had to undergo. And like Thomas, people see the pain in the world, see that death is everywhere, they see violence, they see injustice, they see evil.

[7:32] And that observation often leads people to doubt. The kind of doubt that comes from a place of deep pain. Do we have an answer?

Well, again, what was the answer to Thomas' doubt? The answer was Jesus. And our answer is Jesus.

Our answer to the problem of evil in the world is the Lord who triumphed over the evil one, who paid the debt for the sins of all who have faith in him, so that we might be forgiven, and who is coming again to judge the world and to put evil away forever.

Our answer to the problem of pain in the world is the Lord who took our pain upon himself and became a man of sorrows acquainted with grief, so that we might live with him forever in that place where pain is no more.

Our answer to the problem of death in the world is the Lord who endured death, that he might defeat it and forever secure eternal life for all who are in him.

[8:47] That's our answer. But to look at these questions from another angle, we might ask, how did sin and death, the root of these tragedies that can impact people's faith, how did they get into the world that God created good to begin with, and what is God going to do about it?

Well, we need to be clear that God is not to blame for evil and death. Human beings brought death upon ourselves when our first father, Adam, made that decision to disobey God.

As Paul tells us in Romans 5, I used to joke that I almost always end up in Romans when I'm preaching, and it's almost true, so bear with me.

As Paul tells us in Romans 5, Sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned. Well, there is how we ended up in the mess that we're in.

How we ended up living in a world in which suicide bombers murder women and children who are out enjoying a day in the park. Evil and death are everywhere present in the world because of human sin.

[10:13] So what is God going to do about it? Well, Paul tells us that in Romans 5 as well. For if many died through one man's trespass, talking about Adam, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for many.

And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation. But the free gift following many transgressions brought justification.

For if by one man's trespass death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

sin and death came into the world through one man. Sin and death are defeated by another man. That one man, Jesus Christ, as Paul tells us, is the answer. Jesus took the burden of sin, of human evil upon himself.

[11:29] Though he was sinless, he paid for our sins so that we who are sinners have forgiveness. Jesus, who did not deserve to die, died for us to set us free from the power of death.

His death and resurrection guarantee that sin and death have been beaten and that their days are numbered. numbered. But why are their days numbered?

In the sense of asking, why are they still around at all? What's going on with that? Well, the other day, I ran across this quote from Tim Keller and our brother Mark Steele shared it on his Facebook wall and it really struck me.

Keller said, had Jesus really come with just a sword to destroy all evil, there would have been no people left afterwards. The reason that evil is on its last leg and guaranteed to lose instead of being totally crushed already is that the final defeat of evil will require God's judgment against evil.

And while there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, for everyone else, God's judgment will be a fearful thing.

[12:57] And God is patient, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. So that is why Jesus has not yet returned.

but he will. So we're waiting for the second coming of Christ, for when he comes again to judge the world and to make all things new.

As the great Anglican poet T.S. Eliot put it in his classic poem Ash Wednesday, this is the time of tension between dying and birth.

So, we and the whole creation await the final redemption that the resurrection of Christ guarantees. As we read in Romans 8, the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not because of him who subjected it in hope, but the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

[14:12] For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. Not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

For in this hope we were saved. That pretty well describes where we are between the time of the resurrection and ascension of Christ and the coming of the Spirit and his second coming.

And it can be a tough place to be, God. But the Spirit helps us in our weakness, doesn't he? Thank God. We don't always know how to pray as we ought.

We don't always know how to believe as we ought. But the Spirit is dwelling within us, within our hearts, teaching us to pray, teaching us to trust in God's promises.

promises. When we're prone to doubt or despair or to weakness, the Spirit helps us. Thank God.

[15:34] Looking back at that example of Thomas, what assisted him in his doubt so that his doubt turned to faith? It was nothing other than Jesus offering himself to Thomas.

And if we struggle with doubt, that is our answer too. We might not see him with our eyes and touch his wounds with our hands, but we can know Jesus and have a relationship with him.

We come to know him when we spend time in the word of God. We encounter him in the sacraments. We grow in our relationship with him in prayer. As we come to know our Savior, more and more, our faith in him grows, and we find in our lives that faith in Christ really is the answer.

So this morning, do you have a relationship with Jesus? Do you know him? Do you know the power of his resurrection? And if not, why not?

If you come to him, he will not turn you away. And if you do know him, do you ever find yourself struggling with doubt?

[16:56] If so, when doubt arises, it's helpful to pray something like this, Lord, I believe, help my unbelief. love. You know, all of us stumble sometimes.

All of us sometimes carry a hard-hearted, unbelieving refusal to trust fully in the promises of God. Only one man who ever lived believed and obeyed the promises of God perfectly, God is Jesus.

He did it for you and did it for me that our hard-hearted disobedience might be forgiven, and he is our answer. He's our answer.

He was Thomas' answer, and he's ours too. Before Thomas met the risen Christ, he didn't truly realize that paradoxically he would find eternal life in the crucified one.

Find life in the cross of Christ. But it's true. And Christ really is risen. The tomb really is empty.
[18 : 15] Sin and death really have been defeated and will one day be cast away forever. Do we believe that? As he called to Thomas, he calls to us, do not disbelieve, but believe and see in Jesus for who he really is and what he has done for us.

We say with Thomas, my Lord and my God. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.