

It's a song entitled, *Afraid to Love Again*. It's a song about someone that's been hurt by love. They've had their dreams shattered.

Their future plans have come to an end. And as a result, they're afraid to love again. That reality, according to Dr. Randy Gunther, who is a clinical psychologist and marriage counselor, is a reality, she says, that has exploded over the last two decades because of the growth of online dating. From the pioneers of online dating sites like Match.com in 1995 to eHarmony in 2000 to the plethora of sites that you can find today, people are able to offer others anything and everything they think they're looking for.

[7 : 07] Dr. Gunther writes this, quote, This rich smorgasbord of dating sites has resulted in emotional food poisoning.

Illegitimate advertisements and high-risk involvements abound, and most dating services offer far more than they deliver.

Dr. Gunther goes on to explain, This unlimited exposure, rife with uncertainties, leaves relationship seekers open to experiences that too often end in disappointment and disillusionment.

As a result, scars mount, and the likely search for a partner who can heal them from past defeats becomes an unlikely probability.

Great potential partners don't want to knock down barriers they did not create. Close quote. In other words, as a result, as theologian Dolly Parton and Porter Wagner say, what happens as a result of this is people become afraid to love again.

[8 : 35] Faith family, as most of us know, that's true. That is, when you get hurt over and over again in relationships, it can become very difficult to love again. And of course, that's not just true in the area of love, is it?

That's true in any area of life where you've experienced hurt or disappointment. For example, some of you, if you've lost a lot of money in an investment, it can become very hard to invest again.

If you've been hurt or betrayed by a friend, it can become very hard to trust again. If you had a very scary situation in the ocean, it can become very hard to get close to the water again.

If you've been burned by a church, it can become very difficult to go to church again. In other words, I couldn't get this image out of my mind.

There's times when we kind of feel like that scene from *Talladega Nights*. You know that scene when Ricky Bobby returns to the racetrack for the first time after his major accident.

[9 : 50] Country music, Ricky Bobby. This is an amazing sermon, all right? He's afraid to drive again. He's been involved in a very serious accident.

And to get back on the track is a very hard thing to do. Don't we all know this to be true? That when we've experienced tragedy and hurt, it's hard to believe again.

In other words, what we experience is this. Are you with me? Our faith has turned to ashes. And that's not only true with a friendship or an investment or a personal tragedy.

I don't know about you, but this is also true when it comes to our faith in God. Amen? I mean, we trusted Him and we prayed like the Bible told us to. And we stepped out in faith and we were certain that God was going to do what He said He would do.

And then things didn't go the way we thought they would go. And our faith in God turned to ashes. It became very hard to believe again.

[11 : 03] And if you're here tonight and that's you, and I think that there are some of you here in this place tonight and some of you that are watching online, and that's right where you are, it's hard to believe again.

Your faith is in the ashes. And I just want you to know this. Are you listening? Look right here. You're in really good company. Because one of Jesus' own disciples had his faith turned to ashes. His name is Thomas, verse 25. So the other disciples told him, told Thomas, we have seen the Lord. But 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.

Thomas here, his faith has turned to ashes. And you can't even mention Thomas' name without thinking of his nickname. What is his nickname? Say it.

Doubting Thomas. Thomas. And that's unfortunate that that's how we know Thomas. Amen? There is not a single person in this place tonight that wants to be defined by your worst moment.

[12 : 19] Amen? And of course, that's exactly what our culture loves to do, is define you by your worst moment. You see, seeing Thomas as doubting Thomas is unfortunate for three reasons.

First of all, is that Thomas was a great person of faith. There is no evidence whatsoever that this doubting was the entire faith experience of Thomas' life.

No doubt it was a part of it, but it doesn't define the entirety of it. You see, here's a little side note that I want you to get tonight. Look at me, faith family. You are not a single event.

You're not a single event in your life. You do ten things, two of them, or maybe struggle or failures, and you, along with the culture, tends to define you by those two things rather than seeing that all ten of those things are a part of your story.

What I want to encourage you tonight is this. Regardless of what the culture says, Jesus does not define you by a tweet or the weakest moment of your life.

[13:34] Jesus defines you by his very righteousness given to you by grace. Thomas, known as doubting Thomas, is unfortunate because there's no evidence that his whole life was one of doubting.

Second, is that the doubt or the questions that Thomas has here in John 20 are both natural and understandable. In other words, I don't blame Thomas at all for saying what he's saying.

After all, he went all in on following Jesus. He believed that Jesus was the Messiah. And look at me, faith family. The last time he put his eyes on Jesus, Jesus looked something like this.

In other words, excuse him just a little bit if it's hard to love again.

Excuse him just a little bit if it's hard to believe again. He has every reason to think the story's over.

[14:43] Third reason why it's unfortunate that we see him as doubting Thomas is that Thomas' doubt was experienced by the other disciples. We pin this on him because of John 20, but what about Luke 24, 21?

Notice it on the screen. These are a couple of the other disciples who say this, but we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.

In other words, other disciples thought the game was over also. Faith family, hear me tonight. The disciples thought that Jesus' death was the tragic end to a vision they had given their lives to.

And so it was hard for them to believe again. And so let me just say this, faith family, and I've kind of commented on this as we've gone throughout the series. If Thomas walked into faith family, do you know what we would do with him and his doubts?

We would receive him. And he wouldn't feel second class here because he is just like all of us who have had our faith turned to ashes.

[16:02] Are you with me? But there is something that has happened that Thomas doesn't realize yet. Verse 19. On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors were locked where the disciples were fear of the Jews.

And Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, peace be with you. And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. And the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.

In other words, what Thomas doesn't know is this. Jesus is alive. I mean, really alive. It's not a hoax. It's not a bad dream.

Jesus has done what no one else in history has ever done. He has risen from the dead, never to die again. And the disciples, unlike Thomas, have personally witnessed this.

And that is why by later on in chapter 20, they are encouraged in their faith. They are empowered by their faith. And they cannot wait to tell Thomas, verse 25. So the other disciples told him, we have seen the Lord.

[17:12] Thomas, you need to understand, Jesus is alive. We have seen him. We have witnessed this for ourselves. You're never gonna believe it. And Thomas says, I know. I'm never gonna believe it.

Because my faith is in the ashes. Look at it, verse 25, the rest of it. Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails. Place my finger into the mark of the nails and place my hand into his side.

Listen, guys, listen. I'm not gonna believe it. It's hard for me to believe what you're saying.

And faith family, I want us to understand that this experience, the Thomas experience, is a common experience, both in the Bible and in the Christian life.

Doubt is often what I call doubt is like pornography. A lot of people struggle with it, but nobody wants to admit it because it feels shameful. And yet, when you look throughout the Bible and throughout church history, the common experience is struggling to believe.

[18 : 25] I hope that's encouraging to you, is it? Because some of you are made to feel second class when you go through seasons of your Christian journey where it's hard to believe what you know you ought to believe.

And yet, I'm telling you, the opposite is true, is most of the people who have walked this road of faith struggled to believe. They held on and they persevered to the end.

But here's what you need to understand. Somebody just say, preach, preacher. It is not the size of your faith. It is the object of your faith that matters. In other words, it's not how much faith you have. It's do you have any faith at all in Christ? The object is far greater than the size of your faith. And there have been a lot of people in the Bible and throughout church history that had very little faith to hold on to.

I'll give you just a few. These are examples I've referenced before, but remember Abraham and Sarah? Like, do you get more big time than Abraham and Sarah in the Bible? And you remember when God told them about the promised seed?

[19 : 37] You remember what they did? What did they do? They laughed. 90-year-old women don't have children. I don't know if you know that, God, but that's kind of a biological thing. It doesn't happen.

Moses struggled to believe. You remember the spies when they came back from spying out the land? They said, no, no, no, the giants are way too big.

Even though I know God said we can take the land, I don't think we can do it. You remember John the Baptist? Hello. Anybody in here tonight, like, greater than John the Baptist in terms of position? John the Baptist says, you know, if you're really the one, or maybe we should look for another. You see, the disciples, like here in John chapter 20, and what we referenced earlier in Luke, let me give you a few famous people in church history.

C.S. Lewis wrote this, quote, I have found nothing more dangerous to one's faith than the work of an apologist. Faith is the art of holding on to things your reason has accepted in spite of your changing moods.

[20 : 43] Mother Teresa wrote this, Darkness is such that I really do not see, neither with my mind nor with my reason, the place of God in my soul.

Martin Luther, who doubted his salvation a lot, wrote this, quote, For more than a week, I was close to the gates of death and hell. I trembled in all my members.

Christ was wholly lost. I was shaken by desperation. Charles Spurgeon, one of my heroes of church history, wrote this, quote, I think when a man says, I never doubt, it's time to doubt him.

To say, poor soul, I'm afraid you're not on the road at all. For if you were, you would see so many things in yourself and so much glory in Christ that you would be so ashamed of yourself as to say, this is too good to be true.

John Calvin, wrote, quote, Surely while we teach that faith ought to be certain and assured, we cannot imagine any certainty that is not tinged with doubt or any assurance that is not assailed by some anxiety.

[21 : 59] For unbelief is so deeply rooted in our hearts and we are so inclined to it that not without hard struggle is each one able to persuade himself of what all confess with the mouth, namely, that God is faithful.

And I'll throw a Puritan in, John Bunyan, who wrote Pilgrim's Progress and the experience of the Christian life as Christian goes on this journey and even on his journey, he spends time in Doubting Castle.

And I could keep going on and on. Here's my point. Listen, if you've never had your faith turned to ashes, if you've never struggled to believe, it just means this, you're a better Christian than Thomas, all the disciples, Abraham and Sarah, Moses, the Old Testament prophets, John the Baptist, C.S. Lewis, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther, Spurgeon, Calvin, and the Puritans.

And in that case, your issue isn't doubt, it's pride. We have got to start seeing, faith family, that this is a common experience in the Christian life.

Namely, it's hard to believe again. Your faith, your trust, has turned to ashes. And how many of you would acknowledge that sometimes getting out of the ashes of faith is a difficult thing to do?

[23 : 24] You know this, you've been burned. And so believing again or trusting again seems impossible. Here are four quick reasons why Thomas is having a hard time getting out of the ashes of faith.

Why it is hard for him to believe again. Number one, is because to believe again would require information he doesn't have. Thomas is asking for evidence.

Thomas is saying, listen guys, I need to see wounds. I need to see nail prints. In order for me to love again, believe again, listen, I need some evidence here.

I've got some like logical questions that I need to talk about. I need to investigate this a little bit. And I would submit to you, faith family, that we as Christians of all people should not be afraid of those questions.

What are you afraid? Listen, if you're on the pursuit of truth, then wouldn't you be open to questions about what is true? It's a great place for an amen.

[24 : 26] You must have zoned out, but that's all right. In other words, I'm not in this because of my parents' agenda. I'm in this to know what is true.

And if I'm in this to know what is true, I'm not afraid to ask questions about truth. Here's what Oz Guinness says. Maybe he'll get through to you because I'm not sure I am.

Here's what Oz says. He says it better than I do anyways. Quote, If ours is an examined faith, we should be unafraid to doubt. If doubt is eventually justified, we were believing what clearly was not worth believing.

But if doubt is answered, our faith has grown stronger. It knows God more certainly and can enjoy God more deeply.

Did that get you? It's okay to ask the questions you're asking in the ashes of faith. It's okay for you to be here at Faith Family and say, Listen, Pastor, if you don't mind me saying, I'm just not too quick to jump on this faith train again.

[25 : 40] I've got some questions and our response is, Ask them. Ask them. And you can ask them without being judged by them.

Amen? Number two. Why it's hard to get out of the ashes of faith for Thomas because believing again requires conclusions I don't understand. Here's what this was for Thomas.

It's really hard for me to get my mind around the fact that Messiahs die. That goes against my paradigm. It's hard for me to understand how someone who I believed was Messiah would die because Messiahs don't die.

Messiahs reign. Messiahs take over. Messiahs, you know, rule. Not become crucified on a Roman cross. or in Sarah and Abraham's 90-year-old women don't have children.

Like, I've got to overcome something that I don't understand. For some of you, it's this. How can God be loving and there's so much suffering in the world? Like, it's hard for me to get out of the ashes of faith because there's something I don't understand.

[26 : 55] Notice this on the screen. Getting out of the ashes of faith calls you to a conclusion that doesn't make sense to you. It makes total sense to God but it doesn't make sense to you.

And many of us have found ourselves in the ashes of faith because to believe meant to understand something that just seemed impossible to understand.

Thirdly, is that to believe again for Thomas required overcoming a past he didn't want to address. And for some of you, this is why you're stuck in the ashes of faith.

You see, Thomas' issue is, listen guys, if you don't mind, I'm not going to just jump back on board here unless I see the nail prints because I've believed in the past and I got burned.

I trusted before and the last time I saw was Jesus being crucified on the cross. And some of you feel that way. Listen, I've started my own business and I know how that goes.

[28 : 06] Man, I've given my heart away and I know how that goes. Man, I've trusted church and I know how that goes. Here's what I mean. Listen, listen, listen. Getting out of the ashes of faith means facing a past you don't want to face.

And that's why some of you are stuck in the ashes of faith because you got burned or hurt or something in the past and you don't want to go back there again.

Lastly, why Thomas and why many of us get stuck in the ashes of faith is because believing again requires changes we're not willing to make. You notice that Thomas says what we read, I will never believe.

He doesn't say I can't believe. He says I'm not going to believe. I won't change. And some of us can get to that point where it's like the reason why I can't get out of the ashes of faith is because to do so would mean accepting something I won't accept.

It will mean changing what I am unwilling to change. How many of you are with me tonight that you've experienced the ashes of faith? You know what it's like to be like Thomas where it's hard to believe again.

[29 : 27] It's hard to trust again. Well, here's the question. How did Thomas get out of his ashes of faith? Here's the answer. Are you ready? How many of you are taking notes?

Okay, here's the answer. You might want to write this down. He took Pastor Wes's apologetics class. Write that down. And I answered the sovereignty of God and the problem of evil and he was fine.

It was a great, great class. You should have been there. It's not what happens. He was enrolled in counseling. Not against that but that's not what happened.

The disciples arranged an intervention. No. You ready? Here's the real answer. All that was the gift of sarcasm.

Here's the real answer. Jesus met him in his ashes. Jesus met him in his ashes.

[30 : 25] This is so beautiful it will literally want to make me cry. Jesus doesn't ask Thomas to come to him. Jesus comes to Thomas.

Jesus sees and knows his disciple is in the ashes of faith. and he goes to him. Look at it.

Verse 26. Eight days later you might note that he doesn't always come in the timing you want but when it's time he comes to you.

Eight days later his disciples were inside again and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked Jesus came and stood among them and said peace be with you.

and then he said to Thomas put your finger here and see my hands and put out your hand and place it in my side.

[31 : 27] Do not disbelieve but believe. Jesus comes to Thomas. What an act of grace.

Amen. Because I put myself in situations like this and I would say this I would not have shown Thomas nail prints I would have given Thomas nail prints.

I mean don't you know who I am big old boy like I am Messiah. I just defeated that whole death thing you know and who do you think you are you little punk to make demands of me.

So right some of you are seeing how spiritual I am right but isn't that the attitude we would want to take who do you think you are questioning Jesus who do you think you are making these kinds of requests don't you realize Thomas but Jesus who is such a gracious and beautiful savior you want to see nail prints here they are hey take your finger and put it here on my side here's what I want you to be encouraged by tonight look at it on the screen Jesus will meet you in the ashes of faith and help you believe again Jesus will meet you in the ashes of faith and help you believe again because look at what Thomas says after this verse 28 look at it this is beautiful Thomas answered him my

Lord and my God that is being resurrected from the ashes of faith that is a man who is drowning in the ocean of doubt who is standing on the shore of faith once more my Lord and my God he doesn't say oh you really are alive he doesn't say disciples you were right I was wrong he doesn't say well I guess this answers all my questions he experiences Jesus personally in the ashes and he cannot help but believe he cannot help but believe again he doesn't believe again by being convinced my experience as a pastor is that most people never get out of the ashes of faith intellectually that doesn't mean that having conversations and answering questions is not important or helpful

[34 : 17] I totally believe that but most people don't get out of the ashes of faith intellectually they're not convinced out of the ashes they experience Jesus and therefore can't help but be resurrected from the ashes next is that he doesn't believe by just getting his conditions met now maybe I'm stretching this you can be the judge here but let's see look at verse 25 his original request was this 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 now look at what actually happens in verse 27 Jesus said to Thomas put your finger here and see my hands and put out your hand and place it in my side do not disbelieve but believe verse 28 and Thomas answered him my Lord and my God here's what I want to say and this is an argument from silence so

I'm not building a whole thing on it but there's no evidence in the text that Thomas actually touched! wounds Jesus offers it to him hey put your finger here but there's no evidence in the text that Thomas actually touches because I would submit to you by this point he didn't need to he didn't need to why because it it really somebody say preach preacher it really oh there's a whole sermon

here and I feel it welling up and I hope you don't have any plans tonight because for most people your issue isn't really the issue it's just that you need a fresh encounter with the risen Christ there's somebody on my mind right now and

I will not dare mention his name and his issue is how can God be a loving God and there be suffering in the world and he is someone that used to be went to Bible college used to be someone known for his faith and for the last several years has not been involved at all in believing and he just has his issues and sometimes I just wonder is your issue really your issue and I'm not suggesting that asking those kinds of questions aren't serious that there aren't real things that Christians need to think about my goodness those of you that know me you know that's the last thing I would say but how many of us are holding on to an issue that is nothing more than an excuse to remain in your ashes you see Thomas his issue really wasn't the issue it really wasn't

I gotta touch your side it's that once he experienced the risen Christ I don't think he needed to touch his side because everything grew strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace amen so how did Thomas get out of his ashes of faith he experienced personally the risen Christ Jesus came to him by his grace and lifted Thomas up out of the ashes Listen to me faith family Christianity is about historical facts Christianity is about intellectual answers but Christianity is fundamentally and ultimately a personal encounter with the real and risen Jesus and that's what brought Thomas up out of the ashes of faith to which you would say well if Jesus walked in here tonight even though the doors are locked John loves to mention that multiple times you know the doors were locked but Jesus got it anyways

Jesus just comes in here tonight and says here I am here's the nail prints touch if you need to touch right we'd say well of course I would believe listen to what Jesus says in verse 29 we're almost done Jesus said to Thomas have you believed because you have seen me blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe faith family this is not a comparison that is your faith is less if you see Jesus than it is if you don't rather Jesus knows what Thomas has experienced will not be the norm are you with me this is not going to be the normal experience Jesus realizes that there will be many like Thomas who struggle like Thomas who are in the ashes of faith like Thomas and they won't have this opportunity and yet how much more blessed will they be when they trust him when they believe in the risen

[39 : 32] Christ faith family all of us know that when we've been hurt it's hard to love again it's hard to believe again and that's not just true in human relationships it's also true in our relationship with God in fact listen listen listen I'm closing sometimes we translate our experience with other human beings onto God here's what I mean because you've been hurt by love you doubt if God truly loves you because you've been abandoned by someone you doubt if God is actually faithful and what I pray happens tonight is what happened to Thomas that you right where you are will experience the love of the risen

Christ and that he will lift you up out of the ashes of faith to the point that all you can say is my Lord and my God and all God's people said amen let's pray together Lord thank you for the opportunity tonight to have this real conversation this real interaction about the life of faith and one of the things throughout this series that we've talked about over and over again is how real this is how real life it is and and so it is with Thomas example about faith that turns to ashes there are many in this place tonight that they have been a Christian for many years and there have been those seasons of doubt and struggle and nothing made sense and they were holding on with everything they could it was hard to love again it was hard to believe again and time and time again you have met us in the ashes of faith and you have lifted us up to where we have said my

Lord and my God thank you for helping me believe again thank you for strengthening my faith to trust when it's so hard to trust again so God I close this prayer by asking you by your spirit to those in this place tonight because I don't know where everyone is in their faith walk but I'm sure given this many people here that there are some that are in the ashes of faith they are struggling to believe would you do what you did for Thomas and enter in their heart tonight by your grace meet them where they are and lift them up out of the ashes of faith and all God's people said amen amen and