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John 20:19-31

Read John 20:19-31.

Well, a defendant was once on trial for murder in Oklahoma. There was strong evidence indicating guilt, but there was no corpse. In the defense's closing statement the lawyer, knowing that his client would probably be convicted, resorted to a trick.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I have a surprise for you all," the lawyer said as he looked at his watch. "Within one minute, the person presumed dead in this case will walk into this courtroom."

He looked toward the courtroom door. The jurors, somewhat stunned, all looked on eagerly. A minute passed. Nothing happened. Finally the lawyer said, "Actually, I made up the previous statement. But you all looked on with anticipation.

I, therefore, put it to you that there is reasonable doubt in this case as to whether anyone was killed and insist that you return a verdict of not guilty." The jury, clearly confused, retired to deliberate.

A few minutes later, the jury returned and pronounced a verdict of guilty. "But how?" inquired the lawyer. "You must have had some doubt; I saw all of you stare at the door." To which the jury foreman answered: "Oh, we did look. But your client didn't."

I think that Thomas gets a bum rap. Whenever someone mentions Thomas, they don't just say "Thomas", they always say "Doubting Thomas" as if there were a bunch of people named Thomas in the Bible and it's necessary to say "Doubting" to get the right one.

Well, I have a news flash for you. Thomas is the only Thomas in the Bible. Thomas is enough. People also act as if this is the only passage that mentions Thomas-at least it is the only one that people seem to remember.

There are a couple other times that Thomas plays a prominent role. There is the story back in John 11 where Jesus is headed to Bethany and the disciples are afraid of the Pharisees. They know that there is a real possibility that Jesus could be killed. They are afraid, not only for Jesus, but for themselves as well.

In that story, it is Thomas who speaks up and says that he is willing to go to Bethany even if it means dying with Jesus. So, why don't we call Thomas "Ready

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to Die with the Lord Thomas”? Why is it “Doubting Thomas”?

There is another passage coming up in John 21. A group of the disciples are out on a boat fishing. The resurrected Christ appears on the shore. It is Thomas who first recognizes him and points him out to the others. Why isn't it “Eagle Eye Thomas”? Why must it be “Doubting Thomas”?

Even today's passage closes with a statement of faith from Thomas. Why isn't it “Believing Thomas”?

I guess it is sort of like the nicknames that kids get. Sometimes kids, especially around junior high, will try to come up with cool nicknames for themselves. The problem is that you rarely get to choose your nickname-usually it's just given to you.

And it's usually given to you in memory of some unflattering situation. Why else would we have folks walking around with nicknames like “stinky, pugsly or fathead”?

Thomas was not always seen in a negative light. In the second and third century, people began making up their own gospels, usually to justify some odd theological viewpoint.

They named these made up books after leading figures in the New Testament. There is a Gospel of Peter and a Gospel of Mary, for example. One of the most popular of these fake gospels was one called, “The Gospel of Thomas.”

But Thomas actually got even more notoriety than this. The actual historical Thomas left Jerusalem and traveled all the way to India in his efforts to spread the good news. India was viewed as a far off exotic place.

Sometime in the third century, somebody wrote a collection of romantic adventure stories set in India. The unknown author made Thomas the hero in each of the stories-sort of an Indiana Jones type character. The collection came to be known as the Acts of Thomas. The work is so fictionalized that it is impossible now to know if any of the stories actually have a basis in Thomas' actual work in India.

We all realize that “Doubting Thomas” is a nickname, but did you know that Thomas itself is a nickname? “Thomas” comes from the Aramaic word for twin. The gospels give us a Greek name for Thomas. That name is “Didymus” which is also a nickname and means “twin.”

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We don't have any idea whose twin Thomas was, but I would venture to say that they weren't both called "twin." That would be too confusing. "Hi, my name is Twin and this is my twin brother Twin." I don't think so.

So why don't the authors of the Gospel refer to Thomas by his real name? So what is Thomas' name? His given name was Judas. At least that is the tradition within the early Syriac Church. How is that for rotten luck? How would you like to be a disciple of Jesus named Judas? No wonder he left for India. No wonder John uses his nickname instead. It avoids confusion.

Thinking about the two disciples named Judas-Judas Iscariot and Judas Thomas-got me to wondering if the two had anything else in common. Specifically, I got to thinking about how each of them dealt with their doubts.

Why did Judas Iscariot betray Jesus? I doubt that it was for the money. Many scholars think that Judas truly believed that Jesus was the Messiah, but shared the misconceptions of the Messiah that were common in his day.

He probably expected Jesus to lead a military revolt against Rome and to establish a new Davidic kingdom with its capitol in Jerusalem. Judas trusted that Jesus was this leader and trusted that he would be victorious.

However, it appears that he did not trust Jesus to carry out the task on his own or in his own time. Judas apparently decided that the time was right for a rebellion, so he engineered Jesus' arrest in order to create a confrontation and force Jesus' hand.

Judas' misunderstanding combined with his doubt concerning Jesus' commitment to the Kingdom lead to tragedy. Judas acted on his own and breached the relationship.

The other Judas, the one we call Thomas, suffered from a lack of understanding as well. Thomas also probably thought of Jesus as an earthly ruler. Jesus execution must have been extremely difficult for him. His relationship with Jesus had ended and his entire approach to faith had been thrown into turmoil.

It is interesting that Thomas was not with the others when Jesus first appeared to them. Why not? Was that a good thing or a bad thing? Where was he? John doesn't tell us.

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Maybe Thomas just didn't know where the disciples had gathered. They were scattered after the arrest and were in hiding. It's easy to imagine that Thomas had gone off on his own and had not found his way to the rest of the group.

Thomas was probably Galilean. I would not be surprised if he left the city entirely, maybe he even went home, and did not come back until he realized that none of the others had left. Maybe he was with the group, but had left on some errand. The disciples were in hiding. Maybe Thomas refused to hide. We don't know.

I do know one thing. When we separate ourselves from the community of faith, it is not unusual for us to miss some shared experience. We talk about finding God when we are alone with nature, but the reality is that we are more likely to encounter God when we are in the midst of other believers.

There is a story about a little 5 year old girl who happened to be ill on Palm Sunday. Her older brother came home from church and gave her a palm frond. She asked what it was for and he explained how all the children took palm fronds and laid them in Jesus path as he entered. The little girl began to cry. "What's wrong?" "I have been going there all this time, Jesus finally shows up, and I missed it." Maybe Thomas felt like that.

Thomas comes across as the pure skeptic. He knows these people well. He would gladly entrust any of them with his life. Still, he can't imagine that what they are saying is true. They must have hallucinated or something.

Notice how Thomas deals with his doubt. He brings it into the open. He isn't hostile or unpleasant. He just doesn't believe it and he says so. He says "show me." He also doesn't leave the group. Even though he is now something of an outsider, he hangs in there and gives things time to work themselves out. This is not some excuse. He is willing to be shown.

Let's play a little game. I'll say a word, and you tell me its opposite. Don't be shy, just say the answer.

Black

Girl

Up

Faith

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That last one is tougher isn't it? What exactly is the opposite of faith? I'm not sure what the best answer is. Maybe the opposite of faith is unbelief. Often in scripture, it seems that the opposite of faith is fear ("Why do you fear, you of little faith.")

One thing that I am sure about is that doubt is not the opposite of faith. Many people of faith, I'd venture to say all people of faith, have times of doubt or areas of doubt in their lives. Oh, we tend not to use the word. We say that we are confused or that we don't understand, but we are just being polite. We mean that we have doubts.

Imagine for a moment that you are a teacher. One student spends the day staring out the window or nodding off to sleep. Another writes down everything you say, memorizes it, and parrots it back to you on the exam. The third is full of questions.

This student is always trying to guess what comes next or apply what has been said in unexpected ways. This third student is full of opinions and is willing to voice them even when they are clearly misguided. Which student is really learning? Which student will actually apply what you have taught?

The second student may get the better grades, but the third student is the one who has internalized the lesson. Doubts and objections are a sign that the student is engaged and growing.

Charles Spurgeon tells the story about a time that he was visiting a seminary and one of the students pleaded for a private audience. Once they were alone together the student confided that he had lost his faith. He talked about philosophical dilemmas, textual problems in the Scriptures, conflicts between science and the Bible, and a catalogue of other issues. Spurgeon's response was "Son, you haven't heard the half of it. Those doubts are child's play. When you have been a Christian as long as I, you'll confront such large doubts that little problems like those won't bother you at all."

The heroes of the faith all had doubts. Abraham, the father of faith, laughed in disbelief when God promised to make him the father of nations. David, the man after God's own heart, was guilty of adultery and murder. And there is that famous story in Mark 9 where the father of a troubled child cries out, "Lord I believe, help me overcome my unbelief." Doubt is part and parcel of a growing faith.

Doubt can be like a fork in the road. We can use our doubt as an opportunity to

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mature our faith and grow in our relationship, or we can use it as an excuse to isolate ourselves and pull away. “Doubting Thomas” became “Believing Thomas” because he stayed with the other disciples in spite of his doubts. He was rewarded with a closer knowledge of Christ.

Let's play another game. Guess what I'm holding in my hand. Do you have any idea? What if I told you that I am holding a coin? Do you believe me? Do you have faith in what I say, at least on this trivial matter?

Now I have opened my hand and you can see that I was holding a coin. Now you have sure knowledge that I was holding a coin. Does that mean that your faith in me has diminished? No, in fact you may see me as a tiny bit more trustworthy than before.

But many of us treat faith and knowledge as mutually exclusive. We think like this. In the universe of everything that might be, some of it we know for sure and we accept the rest by faith.

Therefore as knowledge increases, the need for faith declines. Because we have heard scientific accounts of the beginning of the universe, we feel that we no longer need God as an explanation of the event.

As we unravel the chemistry of life we assume that we have diminished the divine mystery of life. Faith and knowledge are mutually exclusive and we replace one with the other.

That is a profound misunderstanding of faith. Faith has more to do with relationship than with ideas. Faith is more concerned with the purposes-the why's of life, than it is with the mechanisms-the how's of life. Learning about ourselves or our world should increase our awe and bring us closer to our creator. It should not push us apart.

There are other common misunderstandings of faith.

Faith is not a feeling. Those who are in search of religious experiences can become nothing more than religious junkies looking for the next high.

Faith is not performance. It is true that as we develop in our relationship with God we will evidence the fruits of the spirit. However, the fact that we sometimes fail is not an

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indication that our faith is not real.

Faith does not mean that we get everything right. We can have a genuine relationship with God and still have serious errors in our understanding. Discovering that we have an error someplace in our understanding does not invalidate the relationship we have had with God.

So what if you find yourself with serious doubts. What should you do?

To those who doubt that there is a god, I offer these things to think about. Or if you know someone who has these doubts, this is something that you could suggest.

Suppose that I had 4 people come up here and tell you that standing on your head helped prevent cancer. You would dismiss them as nuts. But what if 40 people came? What about 400? Four thousand? Four million? Forty Million? Four Hundred million? Four Billion?

At what point do you decide that there must be something to what they are saying? At what point do you question your position and consider theirs? As it happens, there are about four billion people in this world who profess a belief in some sort of god. Half of those, a full two billion, profess a belief in Jesus Christ? At what point do you consider that there must be something behind what they say?

Think about this. It is often said that human beings have deep psychological needs for assurance and acceptance. It is argued that a common response to those needs is to imagine the existence of God who satisfies them.

But isn't the opposite more rational? Couldn't it be that we have this need for God because God does exist and created us to live in a relationship with him? Imagine a three-year old child lost and alone in a store crying for his mommy.

Now a store clerk comes and tries to calm the child. "I know that you have insecurities and a desire for a nurturing presence in your life. Those feelings, while real, have caused your psyche to create this imaginary mommy figure. It is time that you realized that there is no such thing as mommy and that you learn to address those needs in other ways."

That is nonsense, of course. Just because mothers meet real psychological and emotional needs does not mean that mothers don't exist. In fact the opposite is true.

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We are wired to seek a nurturing relationship with our mothers, and mothers have a maternal instinct, precisely because the mother-child relationship is real. The needs wouldn't make any sense if no such relationship existed.

If you are a real skeptic, I probably haven't convinced you, but I hope that I have given you something to consider. I ask one thing. Continue seeking. Ask honest questions and look for real answers. Because I do believe in God, I trust that if you are open you will find the answers that you need.

Most of us don't doubt that there is a God. Most of us who struggle just find it difficult to relate to God in a personal way. We don't say God doesn't exist. We say that God does not seem real to me.

If you accept intellectually that God is real and that he sent his Son to bridge the gap that separates us from him, but it just doesn't seem real, I have a suggestion for you.

You have a hypothesis that God cares for you. What did they teach you to do with a hypothesis in Science class in school. They told you to test it. Try an experiment. I want you to imagine how it is that you would act if you did have a personal relationship with God.

Now start acting like that. Start praying as if God seemed real. Start reading scripture. Talk with believers. Worship with enthusiasm. I am not asking you to fake it. Feel free to acknowledge your doubts, but put yourself in a position where you are open to experiencing God's presence.

If you do that with sincerity, if you practice the presence of God in your life, I suspect that it will not be long before you become aware of God's love and care for you. You see God is already present with you. The barrier is within yourself. When you begin to push open the door, you will find that God has been there all along. Amen.