

April 23, 2017

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Scripture Citations from NIV (unless otherwise indicated)

John 20:19-31

Thomas

The Twelve were Jesus' closest disciples. But they weren't the only ones who traveled with Jesus, heard his teachings, and saw his miracles. The Book of Acts names two others who traveled with Jesus from the very beginning--Joseph and Matthias--and says that there were also others who were with Jesus just as long as the Twelve. And there were even more women and men who traveled with Jesus at least some of the time. Some had become followers of Jesus--disciples--later on. Joseph of Arimathea, who provided for Jesus' burial, was one of these. The Gospels name some of the women--Mary of Magdala, Joanna, Salome, Mary the mother of James, for example--and many other men and women remain unnamed.

It seems that most of this larger group of followers was with Jesus when he came to Jerusalem for the last time. They were among the crowd who shouted "Hosanna" and waved palm branches. They were at the Temple when Jesus overturned the tables of the money changers. They listened to him during the last days of his teaching. They watched when Jesus was being crucified. Some saw him die. Others received word shortly after he breathed his last.

All of them were crushed. As much as Jesus had tried to prepare his followers for what was going to happen in Jerusalem, they were not prepared. They did not expect him to die. And, when he died, it seemed like the end. It was over. Their hopes were crushed. They were afraid. They were confused. They were sad. They were disappointed. No, they were more than disappointed. They were devastated.

Even after some of the women went to the tomb on Sunday morning and found it empty...even after these women spoke of angelic announcements that Jesus was not dead but alive...they were still afraid and confused and sad and utterly devastated. Some of Jesus' followers stayed in Jerusalem, because they did not know what else to do. Some left Jerusalem and headed for home, because they did not know what else to do.

Luke's account of the Gospel of Jesus Christ tells the story of Cleopas and his companion--probably his wife--who left Jerusalem and headed home the same day that the tomb was found empty. A man whom they did not recognize joined them on the road. They told this man about what had happened in Jerusalem...about Jesus of Nazareth. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people," they said. "The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel."

They had hoped. They no longer had any hope. They were devastated. And they were going home.

It turns out that it was Jesus himself who was traveling with them. Even after he began talking...even after he explained scripture to them...they still did not recognize him. It was later, after they arrived home, when they were sitting at table and Jesus broke the bread for them. Their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight.

John tells the story of Thomas. Thomas was one of the Twelve, but he was just as confused and devastated as Cleopas and his wife. He, too, had hoped. He, too, hoped no longer. He, too, had heard the reports of the empty tomb. He, too, had no idea what to do with that information. A tomb can be occupied or unoccupied; it doesn't change the reality that the dead stay dead. He, too, had heard the reports of the angel's announcement that Jesus was not dead but alive. He, too, had no way to process such a fantastic, crazy idea. Apparently, Thomas did not leave Jerusalem and go home. Apparently, Thomas did wander...perhaps running errands that needed to be done...perhaps simply walking the streets in solitude, remembering and mourning. Or, maybe Thomas did go home...and then return. There's no way to know.

In any case, Thomas was not with the others on the evening of resurrection Sunday when Jesus came to them and showed them his hands and his side and said to them, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."

When Thomas arrived, Jesus was already gone. The others told Thomas that Jesus was alive, but he didn't believe them. It was too much to believe. Cleopas and his companion had not recognized Jesus even as he walked and talked with them along the road. Why would Thomas

recognized Jesus based on second-hand reports from friends who were clearly delusional in their grief?

I have heard preachers scold Thomas for his unbelief, his doubt, his inability or unwillingness to accept what the others told him about Jesus being alive. But when I read this text I see no sign that Jesus is angry with Thomas or disappointed in him.

Jesus was patient with Cleopas and his companion, staying with them and talking with them until finally they recognized him in the breaking of the bread. Jesus was also patient with Thomas. A week after Jesus met the others in a locked room and showed them his hands and side, Jesus came to that same locked room again when Thomas was present. It's like Jesus came this time just for Thomas. He said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side."

Jesus then said to Thomas, "Stop doubting and believe." That sounds to me more like an invitation than a reprimand. For Cleopas and his companion, the breaking of the bread opened their eyes. For Thomas, it was the evidence of Jesus' own wounds that opened his eyes.

Only then did Jesus say to Thomas, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Doubt is not a terrible thing. Doubt is, for most followers of Jesus, a necessary step on the journey. Sometimes doubt comes at the beginning of the journey, and, when it is overcome, it never returns. Sometimes certainty comes before doubt, and it is only later...maybe years later...that doubt enters in. For some followers of Jesus, doubt is a recurring companion...it goes away from time to time but always seems to make its way back.

It is often true that a battle with doubt is an essential step on the journey toward deeper faith. It is when we face challenges to our trust in Jesus--and overcome them--that our faith goes deeper and our trust grows stronger.

Doubt, however, can be a powerful foe. Sometimes we need a lot of help to overcome the challenge of doubt. Sometimes we need those around us to show a lot of patience. Sometimes we need someone to show up at just the right time and help us see again the evidence of Jesus' own wounds. Sometimes we need people around us who will keep on

trusting Jesus when we cannot trust Jesus and loving us when we do not feel loved.

Doubting Thomas we call him. As if the other disciples did not doubt. As if we would not have doubted if we were in his place. He was no more a doubter than anyone else. Hope dashed does not easily hope again. Trust broken does not easily trust again.

We know that. We have experienced that. When that happens, the reassurance of others falls flat. The excitement of others does not ignite. The confidence of others does not catch. Maybe they are right, but it does not matter. You cannot join them. It hurts too much. You have to have your own questions answered. You have to have your own eyes opened.

If you are in a place of doubt today--a place of confusion, lost hope, and devastation--you need to know that Jesus does not condemn or shame. Jesus came to Thomas when he was ready. Jesus will come to you when we are ready. Look for him in the breaking of the bread. Look for the evidence of his wounds in the places where you bleed.

If you love someone who is in a place of doubt today--a place of confusion, lost hope, and devastation--you need to know that Jesus does not condemn or shame. Jesus will meet our loved ones who are wandering in solitude...remembering and mourning...when they are ready. Perhaps their eyes will be opened in the breaking of the bread. Perhaps they will find evidence of his wounds in the places where they bleed.

Our task is to keep on trusting Jesus, when others cannot trust. Our task is to keep on loving those who do not feel loved. Our task is not only to announce that Jesus is alive, but also to acknowledge the evidence of Jesus' wounds. When someone is surrounded by darkness, pointing to the light is not enough. When someone is overwhelmed by their own wounds, they need to know that they are not alone; they need to see the evidence of Jesus' wounds. Sometimes it's the only hope someone has that their wounds are not the end, but--with Jesus--only the beginning.

The resurrected Christ still shows up...though now he usually does that in and through his followers, in and through us, and not in his own resurrected body. If others are going to see his wounds...if others are going to be able to touch the scars on his hands and see the wound in his side, they are going to have to touch our scars and see the evidence of our wounds. Because sometimes it's the only hope someone has that their wounds are not the end, but--with Jesus--only the beginning.