

Nailed It! The Faith of Thomas

John 20:10-31

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Just to clarify one thing about the disciple who is the center of attention today, his first name is Thomas. I only say that because in almost every reference made about Thomas, you might get the impression Thomas is his last name. Invariably when Thomas is referenced, he is called “Doubting Thomas.” What a moniker to be stuck with. Doubting Thomas, sitting alone in the corner, wearing a sign of shame for his unwillingness to believe, a sign that identifies Thomas as the “Doubter.”

Is doubt a bad thing? Is doubt the opposite of faith? You would probably be able to make that case if you looked up synonyms and antonyms about doubt and faith. But in terms of real faith, the faith that is found in the pages of the bible, is doubt the opposite of faith? Unfaithful, now that is completely the opposite of faith. Doubt, on the other hand, often seems to be a component of faith, a step if you will, toward faith. I say that because Thomas was not unfaithful, and even though he was named for his doubts, doubt is not where Thomas ends up in this pivotal encounter that takes place after Jesus has risen from the dead. The doubt of Thomas is a step toward one of the most powerful declarations of faith anyone makes in the whole of the bible. By the time his doubts are assuaged, Thomas says to Jesus, “My Lord and my God.”

In defense of Thomas, I ask you to consider what you think his body language was as he expressed his doubts. Thomas and the other disciples were gathered together behind locked doors. It was a dangerous time to be a disciple, what with Jesus their Lord having been so recently crucified. Thomas and the other disciples were gathered together behind locked doors. Despite the assurances of the other disciples that they had seen the risen Lord Jesus, Thomas had declared his doubts. Thomas had drawn his line in the sand. “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my fingers where the nails were and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.” Hearing those words from Thomas, what do you think his body language was on that night when they were all gathered behind locked doors?

How do you express doubt? It turns out there are quite a few ways to express doubt.

- The eye roll has got to be near the top of the list for ways we express doubt. “Mom, I tried to do my chores, but the television kept showing new episodes of cartoons and I just couldn’t find a time to stop and take out the garbage.” Cue the eye roll from mom.

- The shake of the head is another ideal way to express doubt. “Well, I had my homework in my hands this morning, but the wind blew...and the dog barked...and I slipped and fell...and my little sister sneezed on it...and I was making my peanut butter and jelly sandwich when I dropped a big gob of strawberry jelly right on my papers...” And the doubtful teacher simply shakes their head.
- The pursed lips and raised eyebrow go a long way to communicating doubt. This one is especially helpful when your brother tells about his fishing trip and the big one that got away. “No, really, it was this big, I had him on the line, he was almost in the boat, and my line broke. I swear, he was huge...”
- Simple but effective is the one-word response, “Really?” With just the right inflection, “Really” can really convey doubt.
- Some expressions of doubt are biblical. The steady stream of villagers who flocked to see old Noah measuring and cutting and hammering and nailing an ark, an ark for goodness’ sake when there isn’t a cloud in the sky...how the masses conveyed their doubts by shaking their heads in sympathy and in scorn. “Has he lost his mind?”
- I guess my favorite biblical expression of doubt is the one that greeted the disciples on that first Pentecost, when filled with the Holy Spirit they were speaking in tongues. Some in the crowd doubted. They tipped their thumb and pinky in a motion like they were taking a snort from a bottle of brew and said with a doubt that bordered on disdain, “They have had too much to drink.”
- We took a group of 40 people to the Holy Land in 2011. Our church at the time was in Houston. Our guide was a playful man named Ray who was prone to some exaggerations in his presentations. So, one day when Ray asked me about our church, I thought I would give him a dose of his own medicine. Ray was familiar with some megachurches in Houston that had worship services of 20,000 people. Ray asked me as we were traveling along, “How big is your church? How big is the Pines Presbyterian Church in Houston, Texas.” With a calculated nonchalance, I said, “Not that big. We only have 40,000 members.” I don’t know if there is any way to describe the look of doubt that came over Ray, but I do know he just about choked on my answer. Well, Ray decided to play along with my boast. The next day when we loaded the bus, Ray had prepared a magnificent sign stating, “Wayne Eberly, pastor of the 40,000 member Pines Presbyterian Church.” Now I just about choked. Anyway, for the rest of our trip, that sign graced the front windshield of our bus. In reality, it was a piece of 8 ½ by 11 paper with the words scrawled in pencil, which I take to be Ray’s ultimate expression that he doubted I was telling the truth.

How do you express doubt? More importantly for this morning, how do you think Thomas expressed his doubt? The other disciples had all been gathered the week before and Jesus had appeared among them. Thomas was not there. The others told him they had seen Jesus, but Thomas doubted. This wasn't some idle boast of the other disciples about how big your church is or how big the fish you caught is, this was a claim that Jesus was alive, and that Jesus had appeared to them. They had seen Jesus, risen from the dead. Nail scarred hands and all. And poor Thomas, he just couldn't get there. He couldn't believe.

When it comes to faith, and the doubt that goes with faith, do you know what one of the most common descriptions of what we do with doubt is? We do not say, "Really" with just the right inflection. We do not raise our eyebrows or shake our heads. The way we describe dealing with doubt, the doubt that is associated with faith, is a term that expresses being totally engaged, with every fiber of our being and every fabric of our soul. The way we describe dealing with doubt is to use the term, "Wrestling." When we face doubts that shake us to the core of our being, we don't tip our hand like somebody has drunk too much wine and we don't crack wise. No, when we face those kinds of doubts, we get down in a crouch and we steady our muscles and prepare for battle. We wrestle. Thomas came to wrestle that night. Thomas wanted to grab hold of Jesus and wrestle with him until he knew for sure that Jesus had really risen from the dead.

Thomas did not expect an easy match. Thomas had been in and around the ring with Jesus. Thomas had witnessed just how good Jesus was at wrestling. Thomas had a front row seat when Jesus wrestled those six stone jars equaling about 105 gallons of wine. Thomas was cheering with enthusiasm when Jesus wrestled with the lame, the leper, the blind, and the deaf, whooping it up each time as he smacked down the dreaded disease and shaped the unwilling limbs, when he pinned the ears back and the eyes open. Thomas was in the boat when Jesus wrestled the wind and the waves, he heard tale of how Jesus wrestled with the devil for those forty days, Thomas smiled with satisfaction when Jesus tied those scribes and Pharisees into a knot, and Thomas tasted the fruits of his victory when Jesus wrestled with those two tiny fish and a handful of loaves. When Jesus was done wrestling that day the ring was a veritable smorgasbord, feeding 5,000 people. Thomas had seen Jesus wrestle. He knew what he was getting into when he pulled back the ropes and entered the ring.

If that Jesus showed up, Thomas might not even have wanted to wrestle. Thomas was fine with that Jesus. Thomas believed in the Jesus who turned water to wine and fed 5,000, the Jesus who walked on water and calmed the storms. Thomas had no need to wrestle if that Jesus showed up. But what Thomas was afraid of was that the Jesus who showed up would be the one who gave up the fight. Thomas was afraid the Jesus who appeared would be the one who did not even engage his opponents in the final battle. All Jesus did was surrender. He gave up. He spread his arms wide open and he died on the cross. Thomas slowly climbed into the ring, to wrestle with the Jesus who had suffered, who had been crucified, who had died, and who had been buried in a tomb.

Now I would love to tell you when Jesus showed up that night that he met Thomas in the middle of the ring and made mincemeat out of that doubting disciple. I wish I could tell you Jesus dropped from the top turnbuckle and bounced off the ropes and put him in the Boston Crab, the sleeper, a good old-fashioned headlock or any other dramatic move from the Big Time Wrestling of my childhood. It would make me so happy to regale you with tales of Jesus hopping and bopping in the ring as he tied old Doubting Thomas up in a hundred ways.

But as dramatic as that would be, what Jesus did is even more dramatic. What Jesus did is even better. You see, Thomas doubted that the wounds Jesus suffered were the wounds of a champion. All he could understand was they were the wounds of a defeated warrior. All Thomas could understand was that those were the wounds of a disgraced warrior. Thomas pulled back the rope and entered the ring and he waited for Jesus. Jesus appeared. Miraculously, Jesus appeared. The doors were locked but Jesus appeared. Right there in the middle of the ring. And then Jesus scored the ultimate victory with one simple gesture. Jesus just took his hands and extended them to Thomas. Jesus just extended his nail-scarred hands to Thomas. “Touch them. Put your fingers here. Put your hand there.” Jesus displayed the greatest wrestling move of all time. He simply showed his wounds. And he showed that despite those very wounds, sure enough he was alive. He had risen from the dead.

At that moment Thomas knew. Thomas knew that the words of the prophet were true. “By his wounds we are healed.” There was no headlock, there was no sweeper move, and there was no body slam. All Jesus did was show his wounded hands. And Thomas, as if he had been hit by a ton of bricks, fell to his knees and said, “My Lord and my God.”

Don't ever be afraid. and don't ever be ashamed of wrestling with your doubts. Jesus understands how hard it is to have faith. But Jesus won't leave you alone in the ring to wrestle with your doubts. I don't how he does it, but Jesus finds a way to show up. Maybe he scans the daily listings for wrestling matches, and when he finds one of his lost sheep is scheduled to appear under the lights, wrestling with all the doubts that can beset a person in this crazy and mixed up world, maybe Jesus scans the listings and when he sees one of his own scheduled to appear in the ring, somehow he finds a way to get there. All I know is when you are in that ring, when you are wrestling with your doubts, you are not alone. Jesus is there. And he has this one move that he has perfected. When you wonder, when you question, when you just have to know if God is there for you and when you cry out in desperation asking if God really loves you, Jesus has this one move perfected. He stretches out his nail scarred hands to you. And then he says, “I love you this much.” His hands show his power. He is alive. And his hands show his love. He died for you and for me. When he stretches out those nail-pierced hands to us, I pray that we do exactly what Thomas did. I pray we fall down before Jesus and say, “My Lord and my God.”