

Reason to Believe: Faith and Doubt

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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John 20

Last week when Rev. Jonker introduced our summer series, he said that some of what we'll cover together in our series on apologetics are the big questions that are sometimes barriers to belief in God. He also said we'd be considering some of the questions of our own hearts. That's where my sermon is focused today. This morning we'll be thinking about faith and doubt, and Thomas will help us.

You know, I often feel sorry for Thomas. Who wants to be known for one of your worst moments or decisions in life? When you think of the biblical Thomas-doubt is always the first word that comes to mind. Doubting Thomas. That's how he's known. But is doubt always a bad thing? Something negative? Should we be ashamed if we, like Thomas, doubt?

Well, we're going to get to that question. But I want to begin by talking about faith, about the nature of faith, and what it means to have faith. Faith at its foundation is about embracing a narrative. It's about having a story. Every single one of us, every person who's ever lived-chooses a story to live by. Nobody lives without some kind of guiding narrative. Sometimes they're well thought out, sometimes not so much. But we all live by a narrative that helps them make sense of the world. Jennifer Hecht, a famous nihilist, describes her narrative this way: "the universe is nothing but an accidental pile of stuff, jostling around with no rhyme nor reason and all life on earth is but a tiny, inconsequential speck of nothing, in a corner of space, existing in the blink of an eye never to be judged, noticed or remembered." For Hecht and many others, this is the guiding narrative for understanding their existence and the world around them.

John Ortberg, a Christian pastor and author, in his book *Faith and Doubt*-shares a clarion moment from his life when his guiding narrative became crystal clear to him. It happened at the birth of his first child, named Laura. He writes, "When I held Laura, I found myself incapable of believing that she was an accident. I found myself incapable of believing that the universe was a random chaotic machine that did not care whether I loved her or hated her...I mean that conviction welled up inside me and I could not get away from it...I could not hold her without saying thank you to someone for her. I could not think of her future without praying for someone more powerful and wiser than me to watch over her." Faith is about embracing the story that makes sense of our existence and the world around us. Rev Scott Hoezee, a CRC preacher you might know because he's preached here a number of times, recalls a time when he was a kid, and his father read the end of John 20 at the dinner table one night for family devotions. After he read the part about Jesus telling Thomas that there would be lots of people who would not see Him but who would still believe in Him anyway. And he said his mother commented, "Jesus means us. He's talking about us. We've never seen Him the way the disciples did, but He is our Savior and we believe in Him. Jesus is talking about us."

"All these years later," writes Scott, "I can still remember marveling a bit over a thought that tantalized my young heart: I am in the Bible! Little Scott Hoezee of Ada, Michigan, is in the Bible!" A few years later when Scott ran across that same passage in high school, he realized his mom might have been guilty of a little rhetorical excess. "I'm not in the Bible," he discovered. Not specifically, not personally, not really. That's the kind of thing a naïve kid thinks. But then a few more years passed. And while in Seminary, Scott started to understand a

few things about the divine inspiration of Scripture, about how the Word of God is alive, living, vibrant, sharper than a two-edged sword for those who read that Word. He began to understand that the living God, by God's living Spirit, really can and does encounter people through his story and that God had been doing just that to countless millions of people across the millennia. Scott came to realize that when the evangelist John turns to the reader to say, "These are written that *you* may believe," it is indeed a direct and living address to me, to you, to whoever reads or hears this story. I am in the Bible, says Scott. This is my story. Faith has a narrative.

So what about doubt? Where does that fit in? What about Thomas? And what about the doubts you and I sometimes have? John Ortberg, who tells the story of how the birth of his daughter, Laura, affirmed his faith in the narrative of God as the good, loving Creator and sustainer of life-also acknowledges that there are other events in life that make it hard to embrace that narrative.

Ortberg tells another story having to do with a baby. But this time the story was about the daughter of some good friends of his. On a lovely summer day their friends precious daughter was playing happily inside a playpen (considered a very safe place for a child decades ago) in their own suburban backyard. A backyard with a pool. You can guess what happened, I think, when mom went inside to answer the phone. Well, it seems a hinge gave way on that playpen and when that mother returned to the backyard, her beautiful daughter was at the bottom of the pool. When her body was retrieved and she could not be resuscitated, it's not hard to understand how doubt can come crashing in and shake the foundations of the loving God story.

And there are others reasons to doubt. Sometimes our doubts do stem from our own personal pain or grief. Sometimes our doubts are about reconciling the goodness of God with a world that seems to be steeped in hatred and violence and feels completely out of control. Sometimes our doubts are intellectual. It simply doesn't seem reasonable to accept the supernatural, miraculous events, like the incarnation and the resurrection, on which the Christian story is based.

That's where Thomas was. You see the stumbling block for Thomas was that in his story, dead people don't just get up and walk around again. It's impossible. It can't happen. The story Thomas had embraced thus far said that God's activity in the world was limited to things Thomas could understand, things he could wrap his mind around, make sense of, have proof of. "Unless I see the nail marks in His hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe." I get Thomas' inclination. Really-wouldn't we all like a little more proof for things we find hard to believe?

So, here's something about doubt I believe to be true-we are all on a continuum. There are people I know for whom believing comes easy. Faith for them is not something with which they've had to wrestle very much. They can hardly remember a time in their life when they were not full of faith. That is an amazing thing. And there is nothing wrong with that. In fact, it's a gift of the Spirit-for which to be exceedingly grateful.

But I also know folks for whom faith is nearly a constant struggle. Their doubts seem to rise up in them almost every day. They long for proofs. They want more assurance. It isn't easy for them to believe.

Billy Graham spoke about how the faith of his wife Ruth was often much steadier than his own. When Graham was asked toward the end of his life if he had faith that when he died, he would meet God and God would say to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Graham hesitated for a quite a while and then answered, "I hope so."

This is what I want to say to all, who like Graham, like me, sometimes struggle with doubt; look at Jesus. Look at how gentle He is with Thomas, and take comfort. You see, the author of our story and of our faith is patient with us. He knows our frailties. He knows our grief. He knows our fears. He knows our doubts. And to the weary and heavy burdened He promises His presence, His comfort, His rest, His Spirit.

I've said that faith is about choosing a story. Well, that's not exactly right. Because in our reformed understanding of things-we don't choose the story, the story chooses us.

You and I are swept up into a narrative. The Heidelberg Catechism says faith is a deep-rooted assurance, created in me by the Holy Spirit through the gospel, that, out of sheer grace earned for us by Christ, not only others, but I too, have had my sins forgiven, have been made forever right with God, and have been granted salvation.

Perhaps 2020 has been a year that has challenged your faith like never before. Perhaps the suffering of others or events that don't seem to make sense, and have given doubt a foothold it hasn't had before. Remember that you are not alone and that Jesus is a gentle, humble, patient companion. Here are two other brief take-aways for you.

First. In the same way you may sometimes doubt your faith, you should also doubt your doubts. Yes. Belief in a miracle like the resurrection requires a leap of faith. But there are also many brilliant Christian philosophers, scientists, and scholars who affirm that that leap is not unreasonable. They believe that the story written in Scripture and confirmed in the experience of an innumerable company of believers since, makes the most sense in understanding our human existence and our world: the story that the Creator of all things made Himself known to us in Jesus Christ, who, in love, bore our sin and shame on the cross, restoring us to God and one another, and promised, by His Spirit, to be with us and help us until the day all things are made new.

Here's the second take-away. It's my encouragement for you to believe that indeed, you too, are in that story. That John is looking right at you when he says: these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name. Thanks be to God!

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