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Encounters: The Doubtful

John 20:24-31

If you are just joining us we have been talking about post-resurrection encounters with the risen Christ. Pastor Mark shared a couple of weeks ago of the encounter Mary Magdalene had with Christ in the garden. Remember this? There she is in the garden, weeping, but then the risen Christ appears and when he speaks her name... "Miriam" her tears are replaced by joy. She runs out of the garden telling the good news, and like her we... do you remember the word that Pastor Mark used? It starts with an "R." **Rehearse** the truth until Christ comes again! Last week Pastor Mark preached on Jesus' encounter with the fearful 10 disciples. Here these guys are huddling together hiding out because they are so freaked out by the Pharisees. Then, boom! Christ shows up in the middle of their fear, and they see with their very own eyes the nail scarred hands and pierced side. He breathes on them the Spirit and their fear was displaced with joy. This morning, we pick up the story just a week later. Jesus shows up in the middle of things yet again, but this time he shows up for one guy. Thomas. Everybody knows Thomas, right? He's the guy with the questions. I have a nickname for him. Can you guess it? Nope. That was a trick question. Not Doubting Thomas. I like to call him Loyal Thomas. Let me explain to you why that is.

There are only three times where Thomas speaks in the Gospel of John, and none in any other gospel, apart from mentions of his name. So we get a limited picture of what kind of guy he was, but we do get a picture nonetheless. In John 11, when Jesus decides to go to Jerusalem the disciples all recognize that the trip is fraught with peril. Jesus has told them flat out that he's going to be captured and killed, and their lives are no less in danger. Nonetheless, Loyal Thomas says to his fellow disciples, "Let us go, so that we may die with him." A bit fatalistic, but Thomas is loyal. He loves Jesus. Later, when Jesus is sharing his last meal with the disciples, he tells them that he is going away from them in John 14, to prepare a place for them. But Thomas, Loyal Thomas, is clearly bothered by this. You can hear the concern in his voice when he says, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" He seems to be saying, "Don't leave me! Where are you going?" He loves Jesus! He wants to stay at his side.

But then the crucifixion happened, and it seemed that Jesus had left them indeed. And somewhere in between the crucifixion and the passage we read today, Loyal Thomas became Doubting Thomas.

[Read John 20: 24-25]

Have you ever been disappointed by someone? Have you ever felt the bitter sting of abandonment, of expectations not met, of being let down? Sure you have, it's almost a given of the human experience. We say to each other, "I'm only human!" and we mean by it that we expect to let each other down. It's so common we find ways of coping with it. Megan and I joke about this regarding our completely different personalities. Megan is a planner, and when she knows something might happen she immediately gets a billion ideas in her brain about how it should happen. It turns out that this is an easy way to get disappointed. I, on the other hand, I'm so easy going I can honestly say that I set little to no expectations regarding future events. I might hope for something, but I don't expect it. Whatever happens will happen. At my worst, Megan might call me hopelessly blasé. At her worst, I might call her a control freak. Of course, these are caricatures of our extremes, but the reality is that we are both using coping mechanisms for disappointment. Megan sets to controlling her environment to make sure she's not disappointed. My supposed nonchalance is really a way to internally harden myself in order to prevent disappointment. In the end, both of us have our ways of dealing with disappointment, and I'm sure you do to.

I think that Thomas was a man who struggled with disappointment. What else turns a man who is loyal to a fault into a skeptic? You would think that Thomas would be all over the news that the other disciples had seen Jesus. But listen to how strong his language is. "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." In the original language it's an even more strongly, "I will never believe." Wow. Never? Imagine that your best friend comes to you and says such and such a thing has happened. But you can't believe him because it's just too incredible. But then another friend comes and says the same thing. And then another. And another. And another. Ten people come and say the same thing to you! Maybe there's something to what they are saying?

But I think the way that Thomas deals with disappointment is anger. What would you say the opposite of love is? You might think it's hate, but it's really apathy. It's why I think some atheists are closer to God than some who call themselves Christians. Loyal Thomas loves Jesus, and now when he is faced with disappointment his reaction is anger. The passion in his voice, this strong never, is not a flip flop from his earlier loyalty. No, what underlies Thomas' doubt, I think, is hurt and disappointment. I wonder what he had hoped for from Jesus. Was he hoping that Jesus would start a revolution? Was Thomas hoping to die an honorable martyr's death besides his warrior king? Maybe he never thought that Jesus would die after all, that somehow Jesus would defy the odds and come out on top, showing those Romans and Pharisees who was in charge after all. But Jesus didn't come through for him. He was dead and so were Thomas' hopes. And with Thomas' anger, his never, he's saying, "I'm not going to be disappointed again by putting my hope in Jesus."

Earlier this week many of you responded to my request for answers to two questions. I asked if you had ever been disappointed with Jesus, and then I asked if you had ever doubted that Jesus was real. Your answers were honest and in many cases extremely raw. Many of your answers were about prayers not answered, obedience not honored. "We were disappointed when God did not protect our sons and they were raped and tortured by an Uncle. We prayed for our sons." "I talk to Jesus all the time...but He just doesn't talk to me." Have you ever felt that way? "Disappointed when I did what God's Word said and he did not heal someone." "I have been disappointed by God's response to my fervent prayers on more than one occasion... when I was 13 my best friend started throwing up blood and we were really scared. She was rushed to the hospital. All the kids in my Christian private school prayed non-stop for her. She died anyway from a brain aneurism." Can you hear the disappointment? But as I read your answers about doubting Jesus, they were not very much different. I expected to hear far more questions about proof of his resurrection or existence, but it seemed for many the root of doubt was disappointment. "A manipulative/jealous co-worker conspired to have me fired. No matter how diligently I tried to remain "the better person" and turn the other cheek, the cards seemed stacked against me. I doubted Jesus for allowing the situation and doubted He could or would help." "When prayers aren't answered how I want them to be or think they should be. I sometimes think why should this bad thing happen to anyone when God has the power to prevent it." Even questions of Theodicy, or how God could allow suffering in this world, seem rooted in disappointment. We look at something like the Boston bombings this week, when you find out that an 8 year old boy lost his life, and you cry out why? How could this happen? This shouldn't be! It's a fundamental disappointment with the way our world works.

And when we are in this place of doubt and disappointment, we are very much like Thomas... loyal, hurting, disappointing Thomas. I think we need to really stop and appreciate Thomas here. He's the guy who is asking the questions we want to. Earlier, he asks Jesus, "Where are you going? How can we get there?" It's such a simple question, but it's what we want to know. Here, in his doubt and pain, he is saying exactly what we might. "Show me the proof!" So Thomas makes his challenge, the same challenge that we might make. He wants to see and feel Jesus. He's not going to rely on ghost stories. What happens next?

[Read vs. 26-27]

Jesus shows up! Not only does he show up, but he addresses exactly Thomas' challenge, word for word. It's almost like he had overheard Thomas. Notice what Jesus doesn't say. He doesn't say, "You should never have doubted Thomas." Instead he says, "Here's the proof you asked for." Thomas says, "I want to see the nail-pierced hands and put my fingers in the holes!" Jesus says, "Look at my nail-scarred hands and put your fingers in the holes." Thomas says, "I want to put my hand in his side" Jesus says, "Put your hand in my side." Just think about how

personal this is. Jesus is inviting Thomas to finger the wounds that killed him. I think we should be astonished by this. Jesus honors honest doubt. Let me say that again: Jesus honors honest doubt.

I think as Christians we get really nervous about this. When someone asks hard questions we get really insecure about not having an answer right away, maybe even fearful, as if someone's faith depended on us. I hear this all the time about leadership positions, "What if someone asks me hard questions and I don't have an answer?" But you know what, the Bible is full of people asking hard questions without ready answers. Questions like the one's King David asked, such as from Psalm 6, "My soul is in deep anguish, How long, Lord, How long?" This is the same question that is asked by the saints in Revelation 6, "How long, Lord, until you judge?" In Psalm 10 it is asked of God, "Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" But there's at least one guy in the Bible who didn't doubt, right? What about Jesus? Ah... but then there are the words of Psalm 22, the words quoted by Jesus on the cross, "Eloi Eloi lema sabachthani?" "My God my God, why have you forsaken me?" It seems that even Jesus asked the hard questions.

Do you realize what this means? God is big enough to take your questions. He does not get angry with you when you have honest doubt, he is not afraid of you asking, "Why?" In fact, if the Bible is any indication, he welcomes your questions! You have to look no further than Thomas to realize this. Thomas loved Jesus so he wasn't afraid to challenge him. I encourage you, if you are crying out with the why questions, "Why me, why now, why this, why," take them to Jesus. When you cry out with your questions, it actually shows your relationship with God is healthy enough to take it. If my wife hurts me in some way, when I ask, "Why did you hurt me?" it's because I love her! It's only when I am unable to show my hurt to her when my relationship is really in trouble. So please, Jesus bids you to come and pound your fists on him, take your anger, hurt and disappointment to him so that he may embrace you.

Honest doubt is not just about asking questions for the sake of asking questions. It is not simply catharsis, getting it off of your chest. It is actually a movement towards Christ. We ask the questions because there is an answer. Surprisingly, that answer is not an involved theological treatise on free will. It is not an iron-clad case for theodicy. That's not the answer that Jesus gives and it's not an answer you'll find anywhere in the Bible where doubt is raised. Instead, the answer Jesus gives is himself. Touch me. Know me. Believe.

Now, this doesn't mean we have a blind faith. A blind faith has no basis on which to stake its claims, but Christians actually have good reason to believe what we do, and chief among them is the huge volume of eyewitness testimony contained in the Gospels. And if you think about it, what more could you expect? Video tapes? Eyewitness News at 7 with footage of angels rolling the stone? What other evidence would survive 2,000 years but the eyewitness testimony of hundreds of people who have seen the resurrected Lord, carefully written down and passed

from generation to generation? This is why John says later in his letter to the church, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life... that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete." (1 John 1:1-4, ESV)

Look down at vs. 30 and 31. What does this sound like to you? Doesn't it sound like the conclusion? It sounds like John is ending the book. And many scholars believe that this was actually where the gospel of John originally ended, and that what follows was an epilogue added by John or his disciples later. But if this is the original ending, isn't it amazing that John ends the gospel with the story of a doubter? John has been making his case all through this gospel; believe, believe, believe, he says. Look at these seven signs, look at the seven witnesses, and finally here at the end, look at these encounters with the risen Christ. Encounters in the midst of the darkest places our human experience has to offer, that culminate with an encounter with a wounded doubter. John seems to be saying, have I given you enough evidence? Now can you believe? Even though you have not touched Jesus with your hands, can you believe that Thomas has? Our faith is not blind at all. Instead, we see the witness of someone like Thomas or John, who saw with their eyes, heard with their ears, and touched with their hands, and then we believe, and in believing that we may have life.

If we really believe Jesus came back from the dead it changes everything. It means that our suffering has meaning because God suffered too. It means that evil and death will eventually end because in the resurrection Jesus conquered them. And it means that his promises of redemption are true. This is how we may have life in the midst of a suffering, broken world. The alternative, if there is no God, if we are just a swirl of molecules marking out our days until we return to nothingness, then the only honest approach to life is nihilism: morality does not really exist, there is no right or wrong, life is meaningless, there is no purpose. But very few people can actually live life like this because we know, deep down inside, that there must be something more. We cannot live as if there is no purpose. We desire true life.

Let's return back to vs. 28-29. Jesus meets Thomas' challenge and his response is incredibly powerful. It almost seems to explode from him: "My Lord and my God!" It is a confession of faith, a statement of belief that responds to the evidence. He is actually affirming, here at the end of the gospel, what John has already said in the very beginning of the Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." But this beautiful, rich, theological statement is made personal in the lips of Thomas, "My Lord and my God." Thomas the doubter has become Thomas the worshiper. Thomas the loyal. Thomas the lover. How fitting that the gospel should end on this, the clearest and highest

profession of who Jesus was in the Gospels, on the lips of a man who had doubted.

And what of Jesus' promise that "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed?" Wouldn't you rather be Thomas? He's the one who got to see, isn't he the blessed one? But this is really an assurance for you and for me, those who have to depend on the eyewitness accounts. Jesus seems to be admitting that our access to Jesus is more difficult than the apostles, and yet because it is more difficult is it to be cherished all the more. The apostle Peter says in his letter that our faith is "of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire.... Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls." (1 Peter 1:7-9, NIV) Your faith, our faith, is precious. Because the end result of that faith is life. Abundant life in Jesus.

I mentioned the many Psalms in the bible that raise questions, such as Psalm 22, "my God, why have you forsaken me?" Those Psalms are beautiful to read because they always, always have this tension of questioning God and yet... they end on a note of precious faith. I know many of you have these questions, and those questions are to be taken seriously. These are the questions that are raised every time something like a Newtown massacre or a Boston bombing happens. And we wrestle with these questions, honestly, together. But this morning I want to ask you what response will you have? Will you have the response of Thomas? Will you believe that Jesus gives meaning to our suffering, that in him, there is true life?

If you do, will you read out loud with me these selections from Psalm 42 and 43? And as you do, I want you to imagine yourself in Thomas' sandals. The risen Christ stands before you and you present your challenge to him. As we say these words there will be a pause, and it will be an opportunity for you to present your own challenge, your own questions to Jesus. Then we will finish with a confession of faith and I want you to imagine seeing Jesus. What will he say to you? Will he embrace you? Will he ask you to believe?

As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, my God.
² My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God?
³ My tears have been my food
day and night, while people say to me all day long,
"Where is your God?"

[On screen the question: What is your challenge to Jesus?]

Send me your light and your faithful care,
let them lead me;
let them bring me to your holy mountain,
to the place where you dwell.

⁴ Then I will go to the altar of God,
to God, my joy and my delight. I will praise you O God, my God.

⁵ Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him, My Lord and my God!

Sermon Questions

- REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER: Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- PRAY TOGETHER: Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- DIG DEEPER
 1. Place yourself in the sandals of one of the disciples post-crucifixion, pre-resurrection. What disappointments would you have experienced? What hopes would have been crushed?
 2. Many Christians are afraid to voice their disappointment of God to Him. If this is you, why do you feel this would not be okay?
 3. Thomas' confession was personal: MY Lord, MY God. What would your personal confession of faith be? (Ex. my Father, my savior, my friend, the one who loves me.)