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# “STILL DOUBTING?”

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John 20:19-31



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There was a movie out some time ago called “The Polar Express.” Anybody remember that one? It’s a Christmas movie, but it’s a good Christmas movie about a boy who’s just at that age where he starts to doubt – he starts to doubt the existence of... Santa Claus! He gets the ride of his life on the Polar Express train that goes to the North Pole. Well, there’s this one scene where the boy is up on top of the train and the wind is blowing and it’s dark and the mysterious hobo that he’s been seeing has his campfire going – on top of the train, yes – and they have a short but meaningful conversation,

Hobo: What exactly is... is your persuasion on the Big Man, since you brought him up?

The Boy: Well, I... I want to believe... but...

Hobo: But you don't want to be bamboozled. You don't want to be led down the primrose path! You don't want to be conned or duped. Have the wool pulled over your eyes. Hoodwinked! You don't want to be taken for a ride. Railroaded! [*Hobo puts out fire with the joe*]

Hobo: Seeing is believing. Am I right?

Later in the movie we get the moral of the story from the conductor of the Polar Express: “Seeing is believing, but sometimes the most real things in the world are the things we can't see.” When I saw this movie I was struck by the fact that seeing may be believing, but sometimes you have to believe before you can see.

Which brings us to Thomas. Thomas always seems to get a bad rap. I mean, Peter never got the nickname, ‘Denying Peter.’ He and John both had to run to the tomb to make sure it was empty rather than take the word of some hysterical women. And Thomas isn’t asking for anything that the disciples didn’t already get! Jesus appeared to all the disciples except one. Thomas isn’t there. Maybe he’s out getting lunch. Maybe he’s so lost in his grief that he just needed to be alone for a while. But he sticks around regardless, and it’s a full week before Jesus comes back.

How about this: Patient Thomas, Waiting Thomas, or even Brave Thomas. Who remembers what our friend 'Doubting Thomas' said when they heard Lazarus was sick? All the disciples try to talk Jesus out of going back to Bethany. The last time they were there they were threatened with death and run out of town. The disciples were sure that if they went back they would probably all end up dead.

Not Thomas. The one we call Doubting Thomas is the only one who says, "Let's go with him, so that we may die with him." Seriously? Are these the words of a doubter?

There's another doubter whose story is told in mark 9, and I think I've mentioned him before – he's a favorite of mine.... He's the father of a boy who suffers frequent convulsions. He has brought his son to the disciples, in hope of healing, but they have not been able to help. Jesus arrives and asks, "What's going on here?" The father tells him all about his son, telling him that sometimes the boy falls into the fire and sometimes in water and nearly drowns. "If you are able, have pity on us and help him?" asks the father. And Jesus, as usual, questions the father's question. "If you are able!— All things can be done for the one who believes." Jesus calls the father out on his doubts, asking for faith. And the father replies, "I believe; help my unbelief!"

Jesus commands the convulsing spirit to leave the boy and it does. At first the boy seems to be dead, "like a corpse," but then Jesus helps him up and he's able to stand. It's not a glorious moment, but it does seem to be freedom. Later the disciples ask why they couldn't do it, and Jesus, rather enigmatically replies, "This kind can come out only through prayer."

What prayer? Jesus never prayed over this boy – he commanded the spirit to come out, just like the disciples did, unsuccessfully, but where is the prayer?

I love this – the prayer is in the mouth of the father. What a remarkable prayer: "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief." It's that simple. The father offers on his child's

behalf, a heart full of hope for the life of his child. How often do we see hope and doubt showing up hand in hand?

It's ok to doubt, you know. I think it's even expected. I'm not sure how it happened, but we say 'Doubting Thomas' as though it were a bad thing! I think it's a human thing!

I don't think that blind unquestioning faith is what God has in mind for us at all. 1 John 4:1 that it says, "...do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world." And I love to this saying of Galileo, who ran into some trouble with the Church regarding his theory of heliocentrism, Galileo said, "I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect has intended us to forgo their use."

There are a few other doubters in the Bible. I was going to name a couple of them for you, so I did a search for 'doubters in the bible.' The site, Bible Gateway, found 8,726 doubters – in the Bible! -- including Moses, Elijah, Gideon, Jeremiah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Peter, the list goes on and on....

Let's look at Thomas again. Doubting Thomas – he's a regular feature on the Sunday after Easter. But I wonder if maybe one Easter we should talk about Thomas on the actual day. His name means 'twin' in Greek. Didymus in Aramaic. We never find out who Thomas' twin actually is and I got to wondering who it could be. What if it's me? Or you? How many people here can relate to Thomas? His tone, his stance, the look in his eye as he says, "I'll believe it when I see it." His doubts are our doubts: Easter itself.

Truth be told, Thomas comes to church every Easter. He's here because he loves a true believer. Or, maybe, he's here because he likes the place and the people, even though his questions go unanswered year after year. Or here's one: every Easter he buys his mom a corsage or a new hat, takes her to church and out to a nice lunch, then returns to the real world – his world, anyway.

Or maybe he's there as one who used to believe, but too many awful things have happened over the years – the loss of a child, divorce, or cancer, and he just can't believe in Easter anymore. Like a teenager forced to put on a suit and tie, he endures the trappings of the day – the memorial lilies, the trumpets, the music, but he's not convinced. He is not persuaded that resurrection is real, and he can't wait for the day to be over – to get the heck out of here! Is that us? Are we Thomas' twin?

My mom used to say, "It takes all kinds to make a world." Believers are everywhere; all over the world you find those who've had experiences they can't explain but fill them with such joy -- intermingled with those who remain unconvinced. But the peace and passion of Christ is given to all.

I have feeling that there's nobody who is completely doubt-free. There's a lot to be suspicious about in religion, isn't there? -- the seemingly endless scandals, or putting loving and compassionate pastors on trial for ministering to their entire congregation and not just the straight, white, able-bodied and pledging members. Don't forget what Marx called the 'opiate of the masses' – the handing out of false comfort to get you to conform. It's like the doctor saying this won't hurt a bit, and then it does, but he needed your cooperation.

Death is unsettling. It throws us off balance even when we say 'we understand, it's OK,' or 'she's in a better place.' And Easter is often called out as a false comfort, even though those who loved Jesus personally had as much or more trouble figuring it out than we have.

"Blessed are those who believe without seeing" – When Jesus says that to Thomas, he's talking to all of us all of us, and at the same time we are all Thomas. Brave and Patient, yet doubting because we don't know for sure what happened that Sunday morning 2,000 years ago. We'll never know, but one thing we do know – without a doubt -- that Good Friday wasn't the end of the story, but the beginning. Amen.