

Sunday April 16
Lesson 7: Too Good to Be True?
Scripture: John 20: 11-29

Context:

Today we continue our spring curriculum, “The Life of Faith.” In this second unit, “Wisdom and Doubt,” we are examining how faith helps us to bloom and grow. We look at the various resurrection accounts and examine how Jesus’ resurrection turned things upside down for the disciples and does the same for us today. Today we look at the extended Easter story in the gospel of John and reflect on how God turns our doubt into exuberant joy.

The Easter story of John stands out differently than the synoptic gospels (the three most similar – Matthew, Mark, and Luke), as the sole witness to the initial resurrection of Jesus is Mary Magdalene. She goes to the tomb to discover the tombstone has been rolled back. Peter and John go to investigate with her and then upon discovering her truth, return back to where they were staying. Mary Magdalene stays at the tomb.

As Mary Magdalene weeps at the tomb, she looks inside to a surprise. There are angels in the tomb! When they ask why she cries, she explains her weeping over her teacher’s body being gone. She hears the voice of someone and turns to face him. She cannot see the speaker is Jesus, the very Lord she weeps over! The story follows the Johannine technique of coming to understand through an initial failure to do so.¹ When Jesus says her name, she realizes who is speaking and cries out “Teacher!”

When Mary goes to touch Jesus after crying out, Jesus asks her not to hold onto him. This line has captured great attention over the years. The most common interpretation is the close bond between disciple and teacher cannot be resumed on old terms as Jesus must proceed to his glorification by ascending to his Father.² Mary Magdalene is also given a mission. She is to go and tell the disciples all the things Jesus has said unto her.

The second resurrection narrative of the Easter story in John is Jesus’ appearance to his disciples. Even as they hide behind closed doors, Jesus comes amidst them to bring greetings. They are overwhelmed with joy. Jesus breathes upon them, giving them the power to forgive and reminding them of what happens when they withhold forgiveness. Yet, one of the disciples, Thomas, misses the event and does not have the opportunity to see Jesus.

Like most individuals would do if their friends told them someone had risen from the dead, Thomas does not believe them and will not until he can touch the wounds. A week later, Jesus returns and invites Thomas to touch him. We never hear if Thomas does so and yet we do hear him flooded with joy. Jesus then blesses him and all those who will not see him and yet will believe in him.

Both Mary Magdalene and John are prominent figures in the resurrection narratives. They are used to convey pictorially states of mind regarding the risen Lord.³ Jesus shows how he

¹ Sloyan, Gerard. “John.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 222.

² *Ibid.*, 223.

³ *Ibid.*, 227.

helps all to see him and how he turns sorrow and doubt into joy.

Application

If you google the story of Thomas and the resurrection of Jesus, you no doubt will come across Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*. This painting has a very intimate portrait of Thomas putting his fingers towards the wounded side of Christ, pierced by the sword to be assured of his death. As the other disciples lean in, you see Jesus in an open posture allowing Thomas to touch him and the other disciples to lean in.

I think the resurrection of Jesus always invites us to lean in every time we hear or read the story. There are so many amazing details and events. The characters are so vivid with human emotions like sorrow and doubt. There at the center of it all stands Jesus, saying words such as "Peace be with you," and engaging in physical activity like breathing upon them or inviting them to touch him or to even let go of him. The narrative is surreal, inviting us to have our breaths taken away repeatedly.

Yet if we are all honest, we have probably had our doubts, or at least wrestled with God. It may not be over the events of the text and the historicity, or it may be over those very things. Or often, we doubt because we see the world we live in today and it does not reflect these bright and beautiful accounts according to John.

As I reflect though, I wonder if we can see ourselves in these stories a little more clearly with time. Throughout the text, even with Jesus rising from the dead, you see there is still tension and anxiety. Mary Magdalene is immersed in grief and cannot initially see Jesus is the one standing there. The disciples are hiding behind locked doors because the Sanhedrin is still out there, and the Romans are still in power. Thomas has suffered great grief only to discover his Lord came back and everyone saw Jesus but him.

In all these characters' narratives, we see glimpses of our own world. In my own experience in my life and in being a part of communities, I can tell you like Mary Magdalene, everyone copes with some kind of loss. It may be of a person, or an event, or even of a way of life. At times, our grief over things blinds us and we are held in a place searching for meaning or control.

And like the disciples, we live in a world where we like the idea of locking our doors. Every day we turn on the news and there is terror all around. There are shootings, there is violence, and people are mean to each other. Just as we've been saying for decades and centuries, it feels like the end is right around the corner.

Then there's fear of missing out (FOMO according to my college students and BUMC teens). We are all afraid of missing out on life around us and not being included in things. We may fantasize about the life we could have or focus on things in the future. In the meantime, we doubt, and we question everything.

This is where Jesus appears and reminds humanity he's been there all along. Amid loss, we are given things which remind us of people and maybe even new experiences. And while the world does indeed have terrible things, we also see Jesus moving and inspiring others to do small things with great love. If we pay attention close enough, we also find we are not missing on anything. Jesus has been there all along to give us joy if we will just receive it and embrace it all. Every day is a gift and even though there are questions and concerns, there is always the promise of Jesus meeting us every day.

God can handle the things we throw in God's path: grief, anxiety, and concern. What God offers us though is a chance to also look for joy and experience Jesus' resurrection in the here

and now. The narratives today remind us of how we might be prone to miss out the joy Jesus offers us. Yet time and time again, Jesus wants us to pick up on the little things and see the goodness he offers today.

Why is it tempting to only focus on loss or doubt? How does the resurrection of Jesus change daily living? Who do you identify with in these narratives, Mary Magdalen, or Thomas? How has Jesus come back for you in your walk? What are the ways you can daily search for joy?

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Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*