

Title: The Astonishing Gift of Faith

Subtitle: Working through honest doubt to arrive at a confident faith.

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/M1vpqQ1fE9Y>

The Gospel appointed for today covers two resurrection appearances of our Lord to his disciples. In the first instance, the disciples' emotional state rapidly changes from despair and disillusionment to joy and peace. In the second encounter, our Lord offers irrefutable proof to Thomas despite his confirmed skepticism. In both cases, the disciples sought to regroup after losing their beloved leader and were prepared for the worst. Then, imagine their astonishment and awe when the One they had deserted and seen dead and buried suddenly appeared among them with convincing, undeniable proof as He “shows them his hands and his side.”¹ It is hard to imagine the shock they felt as they realized that the most extraordinary event in the history of the world had occurred right before their very eyes.

The resurrection was the surprise of surprises, which none of them ever expected. And when it did happen, the disciples' first reaction included a mixture of emotions that ranged from shock and fear to awe-stuck astonishment and wonder.

This scenario reminds me of a true story of an irritated commuter on a crowded London train who shoved and insulted a fellow passenger who got in his way. Usually, such unfortunate and mindless moments are quickly forgotten about. But later that day, the unexpected happened. A business manager quickly told his social media friends, “Guess who just showed up for a job interview?” It was the very one who had shoved and sworn at him earlier that day. Do I need to say more about how that man

¹ John 20:20

must have felt who showed up for the interview and realized who he was speaking to?

When Jesus appeared to the disciples, they, too, felt embarrassed and shocked. They had all deserted him. Peter had denied him and sworn that he never knew him. Yet, Jesus shows up and graciously offers them peace and reconciliation. The experience seemed too good to be true.

So, when Thomas, one of the twelve, who was not them, hears about the resurrection, can we fault him for being so adamantly skeptical when he states, "...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"?²

In John's account of this event, he includes the insightful fact that Thomas was a twin. As most of you know, I am also a twin. As such, I have enjoyed meeting and sharing typical emotional dynamics and experiences with other twins. In most cases, due to constant comparisons at an early age, most of us (twins) have felt like we have to work extra hard to establish our own identity. But, in the long run, it has given me the strength to stand alone, even if others don't share my convictions. So, as I read between the lines, I can't help but wonder if Thomas' emotional independence gave him the boldness to express his honest feelings, regardless of what others may think. Here is a guy who is not going to pretend. If he has questions, he will raise them; if he has doubts, he will let them be known.

But that same independence was both a strength and a weakness. In this case, it led to his missing the first resurrection appearance. His introverted tendencies that sought solace in solitude made faith in Christ more difficult. Everyone occasionally experiences the highs and lows of faith, but if you

² John 20:25

are independently inclined like Thomas, recovering from those “lows” is even more problematic. Thomas must have been emotionally exhausted and overwhelmed, as any follower of Christ would be when Jesus went from the exuberance of the triumphal entry to the devastation of the cross in the span of a single week. In times of such darkness and doubt, we need each other. For this reason, the book of Hebrews admonishes, “Do not forsake the assembling of yourselves together as the manner of some is.” It is a dangerous practice for any Christian to try to live without support from others, especially during times when we might be tempted to lose heart and give up.

Don’t we all have trouble wrapping our minds around Christ’s victory over suffering and death? Don’t we all, at times, struggle with the idea that something good can come from something so horrendously evil?

We all want spiritual reality, but most of us don’t arrive at a place of confident trust without honestly asking fundamental questions and lots of them.

In his book, *The Gift of Doubt*, Gary Parker writes, “If faith never encounters doubt, if truth never struggles with error, if good never battles with evil, how can faith know its own power?” I like Parker’s comment because it makes our spiritual quest in the face of doubt something relatable and achievable.

As a hospice chaplain, I have had many patients ask me questions such as, “Why has God made it so difficult to feel His presence and see His plan?” Such questions are difficult to answer, especially when a person is also struggling with physical pain.

Ravi Zacharias, a modern-day Christian apologist, helps us to see that “God has put enough into this world to make faith in Him a most reasonable thing. But He has left enough out to

make it impossible to live by sheer reason alone. So faith and reason must always work together in that plausible blend.”³ But working through the fog of human prejudice and spiritual blindness takes divine help. The Apostle Paul tells us in his letter to the Ephesians, “Faith is a gift of God, not of works so that no one may boast.”⁴ Therefore, the personal encounter that Jesus graciously offered Thomas was a sheer gift of love. Jesus knew all about Thomas’ intellectual tendencies, along with his personality quirks, insecurities, and questions. Yet he looks beyond his faults and offers him what he needs. When Jesus showed Thomas the wounds in his hands and side, he revealed something very personal. It was the irrefutable evidence that allowed him (and us) to see how vulnerable he became when he suffered in our place. It also lets us know that we are not alone in our suffering but that he suffers with us in our sorrows.

The astonishment of beholding those wounds caused Thomas to exclaim with profound amazement, “My Lord and My God.” In the simplicity of just five words, Thomas revealed an awe-filled moment of true worship and adoration. The wonder of standing before his resurrected Lord caused him to overflow with expressions of praise that were sincere, spontaneous, single-hearted, submissive, and profound. He said, “You are ‘my Lord’ (the One who has all authority and is worthy of my obedient allegiance. You are ‘my God,’ the One who completes my need for personal and spiritual connection with the One who created me and everything good. The blessed wonder of this newfound faith resounds even today with rousing acclamations of praise: Alleluia, Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!

³ Ravi Zacharias, *The Logic of God*, 2019, pages 3-4

⁴ Ephesians 2:8