

Faithlessness

What were you thinking, do you think I can accept such a preposterous claim without even a shred of hard evidence! That cross was real, I smelled the blood and saw for myself his limp dead body, after he had been beaten and shredded by the whip, those sharp nails were solid iron and that razor-like spear went straight through his heart. Well let me tell you something, I think its all just a load and unless I see for myself the holes in his hand and put my finger in, and see that gaping hole that the spear slashed in his side and even shove my hand in it just to make sure its really real, count me out of enlisting in this fairy tale. You guys must be suffering mass hysteria or some sort of group delusion, or maybe you're even lying or telling a sick joke, but whatever it is, what kind of fool do you take me for. I loved him too you know and you might like to deny what has happened but not me. That is just what the disciples might have heard when they told Thomas that Jesus had just appeared behind locked doors and showed them his wounds and that he was alive again. Thomas was a man of facts and he had seen what he had seen with his own eyes, how could they talk him out of the reality of that gruesome death. If they were so sure why were they still hiding out behind closed doors still running like criminals from the Jewish authorities? Thomas did not doubt, despite what he has been called, he was certain of his unbelief and wanted more hard evidence than they could offer. All the others must have harbored doubt about the future; after all they were still hiding. In fact it was Thomas who was not hiding when Jesus came earlier. Not until eight days later was he again hiding out with them behind closed and probably bolted doors when Jesus showed up again, or had he ever even left? When he appeared he picked up just where he had left off, another greeting of peace to the fearful and as though he had been eavesdropping on their conversation with Thomas, he approached

Thomas with all the evidence he had demanded. Jesus did not reject Thomas because of unbelief rather he provided what he needed in order to believe again. Jesus restored Thomas and restored the faith of the gathered disciples. Just like later he would restore Peter to full fellowship and forgiveness and allow him to resume his role as a shepherd of the flock. He had restored Thomas to the fellowship of his friends no doubt strained or even broken by his unbelief.

I wonder what the effect of Thomas' unbelief had been on the group. I wonder if some, perhaps those who respected Thomas the most, had begun to doubt their own experience. Unbelief and belief seem to be in a constant struggle for dominance in our lives. We say we believe but when crushed by tragedy or faced with death we sometimes cling to what we can see and touch so firmly that there is little evidence for our hope in glory. It is not all just an internal struggle; others with whom we live and work and associate with fuel this unending contest for our worldview as well. I have often seen it in the University and the hospital where students of the sciences are trained in scientific method and taught by skeptics who cause them to question what they cannot analyze by empiric means, and so they should. It is not uncommon to see a religious view suppressed to the point that it seems of negligible value presumably so that bias will not taint pure research.

Nonetheless the rest of us are faced on a day-by-day basis with choices of faith based upon our traditions, science and reason, and the scriptures as interpreted in our faith community. Will we let our mother die a natural death and not intervene with technology that could lengthen her life if it cannot add significantly to the quality of that life? What child will we bring into the world, how perfect must it be in order to retain its chance to live? Our view of eternity does have an impact on these and other ethical and moral choices and even people who love God and are followers of Jesus may have different

answers to these and other questions. So how does our faith change our life and the lives of those with whom we share this place?

In the case of Thomas what do you think were the obstacles to belief? Did he fear that a belief in the resurrection was certain to separate him from the traditional faith of his community? Or perhaps he feared the wrath of God if he was found to follow a false faith. Perhaps he so deeply felt the loss and disappointment that the death of Jesus had brought that he was not open to trust so freely again and risk the same pain. If any of these possibilities were the source of the problem then he was like so many of us today. Some of us are afraid that our communion with the rest of the world is at risk, tenuous over matters of belief, and are reluctant to even share our belief or even our doubts for fear of alienating our friends and family. We are afraid to be wrong in matters of faith for fear that God will judge us with Old Testament wrath, you know death, destruction, plagues, disease, captivity to hostile nations, snakebite and the like. But we forget that Jesus sought Thomas out, while Thomas was adamant in his unbelief, and Christ provided him with what he needed in order to believe. Some of us have been so hurt by the loss of relationship that we have learned to protect ourselves from future injury but refusing to risk love again now. We were sure we would die in our grief before, and so while we are scarred and surprised that we even survived, we can't bear to give up the certainty of life now even if it is life we can't celebrate. Unbelief for some has become a defense against disappointment over loss and it is not a choice for some of us any more than a foxhole is a choice for soldiers in a battle. It may limit their forward motion, but it seems to provide safety for a time while they catch their breath and take stock of where they are and where they are going. Our hope is that Christ will find us where we are and give us the courage we need to move ahead and the hope of the final rest where after

victory we may rest in him. Unbelief is a kind of living stasis or even death where we suspend our life in the Spirit, or at least try to, for lack of strength to continue. Our call as the risen body of Christ is to encourage each other and to believe for each other until we all are empowered to believe together as one. That day will come, as surely as the resurrection came, and as surely as the eighth day, the spiritual day of circumcision came for Thomas, and when it does we can all with one voice, like Thomas, give thanks for our renewed and unified faith saying, “my Lord and my God!”