

Even Disciples Doubt

John 20:19–29

Resurrection 2018

I THINK the way the biblical stories get processed by us can lead us into doubt and even despair. Let me explain. We talk about “the patriarchs,” which means “the fathers.” And we think of them as holy men *and women*. We even call them “heroes of the faith.” We look up to them. We see their faith. But then there’s a disconnect. They were holy; I’m not. They had faith; I’m struggling. How can I relate? How can I be saved? Have you ever had those kinds of thoughts? I have. Let’s return to the account of the resurrection in John 20 and follow-up with an important detail: **EVEN DISCIPLES DOUBT.**

When the first witness of the empty tomb, *Mary Magdalene*, “saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb” (v. 1) she leaves, goes to find Peter and John, and tells them what she reasoned happened: “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him” (v. 2). She didn’t recall her Old Testament nor her own Lord’s words. She thought only of theft. After Peter and John arrived and left she still lingered weeping loudly outside the tomb (v. 11). Even when two angels appeared she didn’t grasp the greatness of the miracle, her mind still lingered on this idea of a theft. Then she turns and it’s the Lord but she thinks he’s just the gardener! She asks him for the body to finish the burial process (vv. 14–15). **Even disciples doubt.**

Then we read about *Peter and John*. John “stoop[s]” to look in but doesn’t go in (v. 5). Peter follows and actually goes in. John follows. When they both saw the burial cloths (vv. 5–8) we read that John “believed” (singular). But then there’s this strange mention in verse 9: “for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead.” What *did* John believe? What *did* John and Peter misunderstand? John clearly saw with his own two eyes that Jesus’ body hadn’t been stolen but raised. Jesus had spoken over and over again in John’s Gospel of “going” to the Father, of “ascending,” of being “lifted up.” But what they didn’t grasp—yet—was that their very own Scriptures said the Messiah was to be raised out of the same tomb he was buried in. In other words, they knew what Jesus had said but didn’t yet make the connection between what he said and what God had said prophetically in the Scriptures. **Even disciples doubt.**

Then there’s *the group of disciples* locked behind closed doors for fear (v. 19). **Even disciples doubt.** So Jesus appeared among them and **showed them his hands and his side**. They respond in gladness (v. 20).

Then there was *Thomas, one of the twelve*, that is, one of Jesus’ apostles, **was not with them when Jesus came** (v. 24). Everyone else in joy and gladness say to him, **“We have seen the Lord.”** Yet we hear Thomas

speak and understand why he's been called "Doubting Thomas" ever since: **"Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe"** (v. 25). In fact, Thomas uses an emphatic double negative with a future tense verb: οὐ μὴ πιστεύσω: "I will not believe—never!"¹ **Even disciples doubt.**

What happened next? **Eight days later**, including the day of the Lord's resurrection itself plus another week it's the next Lord's Day. John speaks of the Lord's Day as an eighth day to emphasize that post-resurrection, there is a new creation. The old shadows of the Sabbath have passed and Christians now gather on the first day of the week when the light of the world arose on his new world. On that day Jesus' **disciples were inside again, and** what do you know, this time **Thomas was with them** (v. 26)—doubting. Jesus appears and like before speaks peace (v. 26). I want you to notice how Jesus particularly singles out Thomas: **"Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side"** just as Thomas said so incredulously (v. 27). This is the Lord of heaven and earth who stoops so low as to accommodate himself to his disbelieving disciple. Why? Because he is love! Jesus strikes right at the root of Thomas' heart: **"Do not *disbelieve, but believe*"**—ἄπιστος ἀλλὰ

πιστός (v. 27). That's the command, isn't it? And just like with Mary, Thomas replied: **“My Lord and my God!”** (v. 28) ὁ κύριός μου καὶ ὁ θεός μου. **Even disciples doubt.** Even doubters become disciples!

Don't overlook verse 29. Jesus speaks again to Thomas: **“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”** So here it is all laid out for us: the tomb was empty, Mary, Peter, and John saw the burial cloths, Mary saw and spoke with angels, and even when the Lord was right in front of her she didn't recognize him; Jesus' own disciples had the Scriptures of the Old Testament that prophesied that this was going to happen; and to Thomas Jesus presents his own wounds to be behold and touched. It's only when Jesus speaks to Mary that she can recognize him; it's only when Jesus sends his Spirit that his apostles understand the power of the Scriptures; it's only when Jesus stoops so low as to allow Thomas to do the very thing he wanted that he believes. In other words, I can give you all the evidence in the world from manuscript evidence, from ancient sources, and from the Scriptures themselves but you'd still not believe it. You need to hear the voice of Christ first, humbly believe in him, and then over time as he renews you by his Holy Spirit from the inside out that all this will begin to make more and more sense! Jesus invites doubters!

Endnotes

¹ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 571.