

End of story?

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Why can't I ignore the disciple Thomas?

Each year, when reading the scripture for Lent, and then plunging into the intense, familiar verses about Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter, I rarely think about Thomas. Indeed, with a few exceptions—Peter's bumbling betrayals, Judas' fatal scheming—I'm hugely focused on Jesus.

Of course I am!

The scope of Jesus' ministry expanded when he arrived in Jerusalem for his final visit. His disciples drank too much at "the last supper" and spent part of the night asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane, physically in a stupor when Jesus prayed and collectively helpless at his arrest. Then, and elsewhere, his devoted followers barely mattered. Soon enough, they'd literally vanish, cowards or clever or both. But what matters in all the Gospel accounts, with the cross looming and Jesus' crowd-pleasing teaching and healing a distant memory, are the manipulations of the entrenched religious authorities and the raw power of the Roman empire.

Who will prevail?

You know the answer.

The religious authorities got their way. With a brooding nod from Pilate, Roman soldiers dragged Jesus away.

End of story?

Well, at least for a few days, for the span of a long weekend . . .

Then the resurrected Jesus appeared to the disciples. Hope returned. Belief soared. And in the Gospel of John, in particular, doubt vanished. "They were filled with joy," the writer of John wrote. Whether written in the original Greek, or translated into whatever modern tongue you want, it certainly felt like everything had become, to

use decidedly non-theological language, peachy-keen.

End of story?

Of course not. After all, one disciple wasn't present during the first encounter with Jesus. With his doubts as glaring as a mustard stain on a white dinner jacket, Thomas re-entered the story.

My *rational side*, supported by the biblical scholars I've read, suspects Thomas was merely a convenient character, inserted for the sake of highlighting the path of many then and now believers: first we doubt, then we have faith. Simple! John, the Gospel writer, selected one disciple to be the role model for momentary, transient doubt.

My *I've-read-the-Easter-account-a-zillion-times side* agrees that Thomas was inevitable and predictable. Of course he missed the first appearance of Jesus! Of course he wouldn't buy what his other buddies from the old days with Jesus were selling about the risen Lord! Of course he'll scurry thorough the motions of questioning the disciples claims, but then lickety-split Thomas changed his sourpuss attitude!

"My Lord and my God," Thomas enthused three speedy verses after being touted as The Big Doubter.

And yet Thomas lingers for me in the moments following Easter. But in this year, along this part of my journey as a Christian, it's not Thomas the convenient character or the predictable disciple that scratches at the threshold of my soul.

I've now lived long enough to know that empires come and go. Had Jesus not lived and died and lived, the Roman Empire would still have fallen. History reveals a constant ebb and flow of mighty nations that are only remembered when used as irksome questions on college exams.

I've lived long enough to be offended by religious authorities. After all, in a miniscule way, I am a religious authority! To use a historically "safe"—and evil—example, many educated and seemingly reasonable clergy justified slavery in the United States through their authority to interpret scripture. We may bemoan our ordained ancestors were shortsighted, misguided, and (since context is a swell rationalization) the world was different back then . . . but are we truly so different now? If organized

religion strives to bring us together, it also has callously torn us apart, generation after generation, and millennia after millennia.

I can't ignore Thomas because his faith does reveal doubt. And his doubt includes faith. Faith and doubt aren't a smooth two-sided coin, but a jagged complex shard of truth in every person's journey. Me? I'd never trust a faithful person who didn't have doubts. Nor would I trust a person who doubted everything and scorned faith.

From first to last breath, we struggle with contradictory experiences.

Like love and grief.

In recent years, I've worked in bereavement support at a hospice. No one will avoid grieving a beloved's death. The anguish of grief is not different from, or separate from, the love built over a short or long lifetime. Love and grief are mixed and matched, the braided strands of luxurious silk and barbed wire that are intertwined in the strong rope of a relationship.

We may desire one without the other—whether it's faith *without* doubt, or love *without* grief—but it won't happen.

Thomas' story will never end. Regardless of why the writer John included "the doubter" in the Gospel, Thomas is a reminder that honest faith is dynamic. On one day, questions about God torment us, and the next day we experience a divine *Ah-ha!* moment. On one day, we act with sacrificial compassion for another, and then on the next day casually deceive someone for our own petty self-interests.

How odd to believe—from first to last breath, from lonely cross to a crowded upper room encounter, and in Thomas' belief and doubt—God loves us on every glorious and grim day.

Based on John's Gospel, everything worked out for Thomas. In the final verses with him, he's a true believer! Now tell me the truth, do you really believe "the doubter" never doubted again?

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