

## “The Next Step”

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Scriptures: Gen 8:6-16, 9:8-16; John 20:19-31

If you were to go into my office, the first thing you would probably notice was that I need to clean up a bit. The second thing you would probably notice is the Lego sets I have scattered around my bookshelf. But if you looked a little more closely, you may see one of my most cherished possessions, a gift from my Mom and Dad given to me for seminary graduation. It is a print of a page from Codex Sinaiticus. Codex Sinaiticus is the oldest complete manuscript of the New Testament, dating back to the fourth century. This particular page is from John's Gospel, the 20th chapter. It is John's account of the Resurrection, the center of the hope, the reality of Christian faith. It is a reminder to me of the hope that the fact of the Resurrection gives me, in my vocational life, and more broadly in my entire life as a Christian. It is an anchor to the thing, to the person that keeps me going, the risen Jesus.

I noticed a while after receiving this gift, that this page not only includes John's resurrection, but the passage we read today, including Jesus' encounter with Thomas. And although I have had a lifetime's worth of Doubting Thomas jokes (its the name I get called most often outside

anything involving a Tank Engine) I am growing to appreciate more and more this story that literally hangs above my head most days.

And I'll save my full defense of the apostle with the best name for another day. Yes, his non-belief of the disciples mirrors exactly the whole group's non-belief of Mary's word (the joy would have come a lot sooner had they believed the women). Yes, there could have been a very good reason Thomas wasn't cowering with the disciples in the locked room when Jesus appeared. And yes, Thomas doesn't actually follow through on his demand to touch Jesus' wounds, but immediately confesses the faith he couldn't find before.

But it is Eastertide, and so I want to focus today on the Risen Jesus. Here is the King of the Universe, fresh off of his victory over death, hell, and sin, sharing the good news with that last disciple who hadn't quite internalized the message yet. And we see in this encounter such gentleness from Jesus. He provides Thomas with both the proof that he is looking for, and the invitation to grow in his faith.

This is a pattern we see in John's Gospel - Jesus stretching the faith of those he encounters, even while he meets them where they are. Jesus will meet you where you are, but he's not content to leave you there.

It is often noted that one of the ways that the gospel of John differs from the other three gospels is the frequency and the length of the dialogues between Jesus and individuals he encounters. The picture that John gives us of Jesus highlights how personal he can be, who he is in conversation, not just with groups of people, but with individuals upon whom he looks with love.

Take for example, Nathaniel in John chapter one.<sup>1</sup> When Nathaniel hears from Phillip that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, his prejudice and his non-belief start showing: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?," he asks. What follows is one of my favorite responses of Jesus in all the gospels: it's gracious, it's funny, and it calls for greater faithfulness all at the same time. Remember what Jesus says? When he sees Nathaniel, he says, "Behold, an Israelite indeed in whom there is no deceit!" There is so much in this gentle rebuke. Nathaniel says something downright mean and Jesus' response is to say, "Woah, here's a guy who doesn't hide anything he's thinking!" Then Jesus tells Nathaniel that he saw him when they weren't around each other and this is enough to bring Nathaniel on board. The invitation continues: "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these...Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." In other

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<sup>1</sup> John 1:43-51

words, Nathaniel, you ain't seen nothing yet. Nathaniel is invited out of prejudice, out of unbelief, into greater faith.

Or take Nicodemus in John 3.<sup>2</sup> He shows initiative, even faith. Yes he comes at night because he's afraid of what his buddies might think of him, but he admits, he declares that Jesus is a teacher from God. He knows there is something there. But he has some intellectual hang ups. He can't seem to figure out the mechanics of what it means to be born a second time. Jesus invites him to take the next step, to belief in the Son of Man.

Moving to the next chapter, we see Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well.<sup>3</sup> When she is initially offered living water, she takes it as an opportunity to not have to draw water to quench physical thirst and asks for it. But as Jesus reveals himself to be speaking of a different kind of nourishment, she catches on, and moves the conversation to a theological discussion. She asks good questions. And Jesus reveals to her that he is the Messiah. She takes that invitation and shares it with her village, accepting the call to share with others the good news that she had received.

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<sup>2</sup> John 3:1-21

<sup>3</sup> John 4:1-45

Consider also Mary and Martha, grieving the loss of their brother Lazarus.<sup>4</sup> Martha and Mary both show great faith, albeit confused and angry faith, “Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.” They use the same words. Words that at the same time acknowledge Jesus’ authority and power and also ask why he had not chosen to act on that authority and power. But remember how Jesus responds differently to each of the sisters, according to their needs. He meets them where they are. Martha is ready for a discussion. And so Jesus engages her. He tells her he is the resurrection and the life. He invites her to belief. Mary needs something different in this moment. She hadn’t come out to meet Jesus. As she comes weeping at his feet, Jesus’ next move is toward the tomb, because it is time for Lazarus to come back. No discussion with Mary, but an invite, all the same, to come and see what the power of God can do.

For our final non-Thomas story today, we jump ahead to Peter and Jesus’ final interaction in John’s gospel.<sup>5</sup> This is the scene of reconciliation with Peter, as he asks him three times, the same number of times that Peter had denied him to others, if he loves him. As Peter confirms his love for Jesus each time, Jesus gives him an invitation, “Feed my sheep.” Jesus goes on to show Peter that his obedience would in fact be unto death. Gentleness, forgiveness, but also an invitation into further faithfulness,

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<sup>4</sup> John 11:1-44

<sup>5</sup> John 21:15-19

into the next step of faith. It is a beautiful symmetry in John's gospel that Peter gets his call from Jesus, "Follow me," not at the beginning of the story, but at the end. It's a new beginning after Peter's failure on Good Friday, but also a reminder that wherever we are on our path of following Jesus, and whatever role has been given to us for whatever length of time, the command remains the same: "Follow me."

And so with these other encounters in the back of our minds, we return to Thomas. Thomas had seen a great many things. He had seen the water turned into wine at the wedding feast at Cana. He had seen Jesus clear the Temple of those who were using it to take advantage of others for their own gain. He had seen him heal the official's son and the man beside the pool at Bethesda. He had seen him feed the 5000 and walk on water. He had seen him heal the man that was born blind. He had seen him raise Lazarus from the dead.

And yet, that somehow wasn't enough. Thomas had heard at least, Peter and John's story that the tomb was empty, but that could be for any number of reasons. He had heard Mary's story that she had seen the resurrected Jesus, but Mary was just one witness. He had heard the disciples corroborate her story, but what proof did they have. No unless he had tangible proof himself, he couldn't believe it. And not even just

visual proof would do, he wanted real, hard, touchable evidence that Jesus had risen again. Or so he claimed.

Because Jesus offers, when he does appear to Thomas, exactly what he asked for. "Here, touch my hands. Put your hand into my side." But at that point, those steps weren't necessary. Thomas cries out in praise, "My Lord and my God." Jesus knew what Thomas needed. And he was ready to offer it to him, and yet he invites him to greater faith, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are all those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Jesus was ready to meet Thomas where he was. He knew what Thomas needed. But he wasn't content to leave him there. Jesus wants Thomas to take the next step of faith. And from what we understand from church tradition, Thomas did just that. Thomas is known for taking the Gospel all the way to India. This moment in the room with the risen Jesus was not the last time Thomas would have to trust the Lord, it was the next time, which was followed by the next time, and the next time, and the time after that.

The big thing that is happening in our house these days is that Charlie has begun to take his first steps, and despite the council we have received to do otherwise, we are trying to help him learn how to walk.

Right now, his movement is nothing more than a few wobbly movements from one thing he can hold onto to another, accented by the occasional slow squat down to the ground. Objectively speaking, he is terrible at walking. But don't think that means I don't explode with excitement with every little unsure step he takes. I am overjoyed when two steps become three and three steps become four. I have no illusions that he will be running or jumping any time soon. But as he keeps at it, those things will come.

My celebration of his small efforts do not mean that I don't desire him to improve, and so we're constantly waving a toy or something else he wants in front of him, encouraging to take just one more step.

There in the room with the other disciples, Jesus is inviting Thomas to take that next step in faith. There will be more to come and soon, he will begin to take them without even thinking about it.

Perhaps you feel a bit like Thomas this morning. You just need some tangible assurance that Jesus, that the Resurrection is real. Perhaps you feel like the only one who hasn't got that assurance. You feel like you were the only one who wasn't in the room the time that God showed up. This is an easy and isolating thing to feel in the Church, where we often put our best face forward. It's easy to think that you're the only one who



doesn't have everything together, easy to think that you are the only one who doesn't feel like you're hearing from God.

First I want to say to those who feel that way this morning that you are not alone. Jesus is here and invites you to take the next step in faith, and you are more blessed if you take that step feeling like you don't see anything.

And also, don't give up. God is faithful. It is an interesting pairing of readings we have this morning between our Gospel and Old Testament passages. I imagine Noah felt a bit like Thomas, surrounded by water not knowing how long he and his family and the animals would be confined on the ark. But he kept sending out birds to fly over that expanse of water, even when some came back with no sign of hope and others didn't come back at all. Noah was desperate for a sign of anything, for any little shred of hope that he could cling to. And like with Jesus and Thomas, God showed up right on time.

We carry the greatest news that could ever be - that God defeated death and there is hope beyond the grave. Wherever we are in the story today, if we are like Mary and have been privy as long as anyone, if we are like the disciples and we have seen the Lord, or if we are like Thomas and we're grasping for anything to keep hope alive, let's rejoice in what we have

seen and be spurred into greater belief of what we have not seen. Let's listen for that next step of faith into which Jesus is calling us, and let us give glory to the One without whom this good news would not exist.