

NAVIGATING DOUBT AND DISBELIEF WITH YOUR FAMILY

When Doubt Comes

If a holiday could be added to the Christian calendar, a day that all Christians would celebrate, it would be Doubting Thomas Sunday, and it would occur every year on the Sunday after Easter. There are a couple of reasons for this. First, it was one week after the resurrection that Jesus appeared to Thomas and erased his doubt. Second, it teaches us an important lesson in how to handle our own doubt and the doubt of others.

For some reason, the church in recent years has not been good at dealing with those who doubt. Instead of pointing people in the right direction towards resources to get their questions answered, we frequently tell them they just need to “have faith.”

This causes many people in the church either to leave in order to find answers to the questions that plague them, or else spend their lives wondering if they are “losing their faith” every time they have a question.

But Christianity is an evidence-giving religion. At every stage, Christianity offers proof that what it claims is worth believing. There are answers out there. I am always encouraged that the questions people ask today about the truth of Christianity are the same questions people have been asking for two thousand years. Answers are out there. Many just don't know where to find them.

It's important to start by looking at how Jesus handled someone who doubted, specifically, one of his own disciples, Thomas. Known to later generations, perhaps unfairly, as “doubting Thomas,” he is the patron saint of those with questions. Looking at how his doubt was resolved can help us deal with our own doubts, as well as those around us.

A Living Lord (John 20:19-23)

In the evening of that first Easter Sunday, the disciples were gathered together. They were probably confused, bewildered, and astonished about what had happened. The text says they were definitely afraid. It says they locked the door out of fear of the Jews. While they were sitting there in a locked room, Jesus appeared to them. It was the same Jesus they had followed for several years, the same person they had seen brutally murdered a few days earlier.

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They knew it was the same Jesus because they saw the nail marks on his hands and the scar on his side where he had been speared. He was the same Jesus... and yet different. He was alive again. This wasn't his ghost or a spirit. This was a fully physical Jesus, not restored to the kind of life he had previously but transformed to a new quality of life. The disciples were in a locked room, but he was able to come stand in their midst.

A Missing Disciple (John 20:24-25)

Then, there was an interesting twist in the story. For some reason, Thomas hadn't been present with the other disciples when Jesus appeared to them. Later, when the disciples told their story to Thomas about having seen the risen Jesus, he refused to believe. He didn't do so out of hardness of heart. Thomas wasn't being difficult. He wasn't a coward. Look back at John 11 to the story of Lazarus. When the other disciples thought Jesus refused to journey to help the sick Lazarus because it would be too dangerous, we read in John 11:6 that Thomas said, "Let us also go, that we may die with Him." Now, after Jesus' resurrection, Thomas simply needed more information or proof before he would be able to believe.

A Miraculous Encounter (John 20:26-29)

A week passed. The text says eight days. It means Sunday to Sunday. The reason why: ancient people counted days like rental car companies instead of cruise agencies. If I rent a car today and return it tomorrow, even if I keep it less than 24 hours, the rental company will charge me for two days. If I go on a 5-day cruise, it is more like 5 - 24 hour periods. You don't count the day you leave. The rental car company method is called "inclusive counting" and it is the way that ancient people counted time. That is why we say Jesus rose on the Third day, even though he was in the tomb from Friday afternoon to Sunday morning which isn't even 48 hours. Inclusive counting means Friday+Saturday+Sunday = 3 days. So, 8 days later means Sunday to Sunday.

What else is cool is that though Thomas doubted that Jesus had risen from the dead, he didn't separate himself from the other disciples, it shows he was seeking. And the disciples didn't exclude him, which shows they were patient and understanding.

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On that day, Jesus met Thomas. He appeared and showed Thomas that He was alive. And what followed was the first true confession of faith. Thomas had doubted because he realized what was at stake. When Thomas saw the risen Jesus and felt the marks in His hands and side, he called Him, "My Lord and My God."

When you look at the story of Thomas whether you are the one doing the doubting or are someone trying to love a "doubter," you get a window into a biblical approach to dealing with doubt.

What Thomas Did With His Doubt

He stated his problem - many times we keep our doubts secret. We are afraid that we will be mocked or excluded for voicing our problems. But the problem is that when we keep silent, though we may avoid ostracism, we also keep ourselves from finding answers. Thomas voiced his doubts. It put him one step closer to finding answers.

He stayed convincible - Sometimes people use doubt as a covering for sin. They want to stay in the life they have constructed for themselves, so they pretend to doubt. No greater proof can be found in the attitude of people with dishonest doubt. No matter what answers you give, they are never able to be convinced. You answer an objection, they raise another. Thomas didn't just state his doubt, he voiced the terms it would take to convince him. He wanted to be convinced, and though it may sound like a lot, he clearly stated what it would take for him to believe.

He sought answers - Dishonest doubters use their doubts as a reason to stay put. People with honest doubt are hungry for answers, they seek. Thomas was seeking. The reason he met Jesus was because he was praying and hoping and seeking. He was hoping to find answers. He didn't use his doubt as an opportunity to divide. Instead, he kept seeking.

He submitted - The surest sign of dishonest doubt is what happens when confronted with answers. Some people use their doubt as a way of demonstrating their superior intellect or their arrogance. Such people are not convincible and are never convinced. But Thomas, when confronted with enough evidence, didn't just accept, he submitted. He didn't just acknowledge that the disciples were right, he acknowledged Jesus as his Lord.

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What The Disciples Did With His Doubt

Almost as important as how Thomas handled his doubt is the question of how the other disciples handled Thomas doubting. Sometimes we have a tendency to respond nervously or harshly to those who have honest but difficult questions. The disciples revealed the best way to respond when confronted with sincere questions.

They shared their story - Sometimes, in the face of doubt, those who believe can start feeling naïve or unintelligent. Or they can try to overwhelm the “doubter” in a deluge of answers. The disciples took the humble and honest approach of telling their story. Whether Thomas believed or not, they knew what they had seen, and they kept telling people about it. Never allow doubt to keep you from telling your story of what Jesus has done in your life.

They stayed with Thomas - Sometimes people feel the need to exclude the doubter from fellowship. What’s interesting is that the disciples didn’t do so. Thomas didn’t leave. He stayed seeking. And the disciples evidently kept Thomas close always praying and hoping he would come to believe.

What Jesus Did With His Doubt

He showed up - The most important, and often neglected, factor in dealing with doubt...God himself. We actually believe that God is real, personal, and close. Thomas was honestly seeking. The disciples were hoping and praying for Thomas. And Jesus showed up. So many times, we forget that certain things are not up to us. We are called to love people and share our stories. But if God is real, and if He really does call people to Himself, then we can trust that He is at work in the lives of people who are honestly seeking answers to their doubts.

Our job isn’t to compel. Our job is to tell our stories, to love people, and to provide opportunity for the real, personal, living God of the universe to show up.

Spend some time praying for your family and ask God to prepare you and your children for times when doubt and disbelief may creep in.