

## **“What Are You Struggling to Believe?”**

**John 20:19-29**

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What are you struggling to believe? Is it something good or bad? Are you the only one who doesn't believe it or are there others? What would it take for you to believe?

In your struggle, perhaps you can identify with one of Jesus' disciples, Thomas. Many refer to him as “Doubting Thomas.” I prefer “Honest Thomas.” Let me tell you why.

Thomas could not believe the news that Jesus rose from the dead. Who could fault him? After all, he saw or heard details about the crucifixion and burial of Jesus and was drowning in grief. When he received news that Jesus appeared to the disciples on Easter evening, he reacted with grave skepticism. “Unless I see the nail prints in his hands, put my finger where the nails were and put my hand in his side, I will not believe” John 20:25.

See why I call him “Honest Thomas?” There is no question about what he thinks or how he feels, is there? Thomas refused to say he believed something when he did not. He wasn't going to play that game and neither was he going to be disappointed again. The pain he was feeling was too severe for that.

What are you struggling to believe? We don't like to use belief and struggle in the same sentence, do we? We want a neatly packaged and tranquil faith that has answers, not questions. Sure makes life easier and who doesn't want an easy life?

Yet, faith is a struggle at times, isn't it? It was for Thomas. It is for all honest believers. Why? I suppose there are many reasons.

**Faith is a struggle because life is a struggle and faith is about life.** Real life. These disciples were engaged in real life issues after the crucifixion of Jesus. They were gathered in the upper room out of fear and confusion. They knew hostility toward Jesus did not cease with the crucifixion and were wondering who would be next? No doubt they were fearfully listening for each step or knock at the door thinking anytime the Sanhedran could come storming in ready to hang them on a cross, too. Remember seeing the tape of the law enforcement officials raiding the home of Elian Gonzales in Miami a couple of years ago? That's how I picture this scene. The disciples were fearful of this kind of raid.

The world of the disciples was filled with darkness, despair, worry, confusion and disappointment. Their lives were in shambles and their future unknown. Where was God? Where was this peace they had been promised? What were they to do?

Why is faith a struggle? Because life is a struggle and faith is about life. Surely you know what it feels like to be afraid, worried, confused or disappointed and wonder where God is? I have to believe you do.

**Faith is a struggle because God is unpredictable and faith is about God.** God certainly surprised the disciples that week. He did not prevent Jesus' death nor did he rescue Jesus off that cross. Until Jesus drew his last breath, the disciples had to be thinking that any minute now God would come and put a halt to this madness. He didn't.

Jesus died and was buried. What puzzle did this piece go to? Not the one they were working, that's for sure.

Ever felt like that? Ever been disappointed in God or at least confused about what He did or did not do? You may not have admitted it publicly, but again, I believe you have.

In counseling, when I sense someone is disappointed in God, I ask him or her to finish this sentence, "I cannot believe that God..." or "I cannot believe that God did not..." It is hard for some people to verbalize their disappointment, but it is impossible to work through the confusion until they do. At least I think so.

Faith is a struggle because God is unpredictable and faith is about God.

**Faith is also a struggle because we are human and faith is about people.** Real people. Real people with feelings. What do you think Thomas was feeling? I sense loneliness, pain, disappointment, confusion, sorrow, anger and frustration. Ever felt these? Sure you have. That's why your faith is sometimes a struggle, too. Not all our feelings are positive and neither will your faith be. Disconnect the two. It's impossible.

**So, what do you do when you are struggling?** What did Thomas do? Let's find out.

**When you are struggling with your faith, the first thing you need to do is admit it.** Thomas did. As a matter of fact, he was blatantly honest about it. He did not mince words or go into denial. Neither should we.

Let me even take this another step. When you are struggling with your faith, be glad you are struggling. Someone has said, "If you have no doubts, your God is too small." In other words, if you can understand everything your God does or does not do, then your God is either a man or you are a God. Neither is true and I am glad.

I don't need a God who is merely a man, all be it a good one. I need a God and as a result must accept that His ways are higher, His vision clearer and His judgement sharper than mine. If I cannot live with these things, then I'll never have the kind of God I need.

Let me assure you that your doubts will not destroy your faith if you handle them properly. To be candid with you, I don't think you can have a meaningful faith without doubts. I am not sure faith can take root in anything else. It is obvious that the highest expression of faith in the Gospel of John sprang from deepest despair. Thomas went from "Unless I see the nail prints in his hands to my Lord and my God." That's a big jump. I don't sense his faith was destroyed, do you?

I know all our lives we have been taught that faith is good and doubts are bad, but I challenge that and others do, too. Doubts are bad only if we let them paralyze us instead of teach us. I like what Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote, "There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds." And Frederick Buechner, "Doubts are ants in the pants of faith." Also Francis Bacon, "If a man will begin in certainties, he shall end in doubts; but he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties." How true!

**Secondly, when you are struggling with your faith find others who are, too, and talk to them.** Doubts that separate us from other believers can be deadly. That was part of Thomas' problem. If you remember, Jesus came to the disciples on Easter evening but Thomas was not there. He missed seeing Jesus and continued doubting for another

week. It wasn't until he joined the disciples the next Sunday night that he found the assurance he so desperately sought.

This led to a question in my study this week. Why didn't Jesus find Thomas on Monday and relieve him of his agony? Why wait another week? There has to be a connection between the way Jesus works and our willingness to share our pain with a support group. Has to be. Was for Thomas. The testimonies he heard from others opened his heart and mind to the revelation he needed. The testimonies we hear will do the same for us. Try it.

**The final thing I will mention today that needs to be done when struggling with your faith is to “doubt your doubts.”** In other words, trust God. Isn't that what faith is? Let God be God and trust Him to be merciful and do what is best.

I first heard that phrase, “Doubt your doubts” from my friend, Dr. Jim Taylor, President of Cumberland College. He used that in a speech and it nailed me. There are times when I must overrule my doubts and act on faith. I must accept by faith what I cannot understand and trust God. I do that with people all the time. Why should I deny God that privilege?

I cannot tell you how liberating it is to “doubt your doubts.” To be a believer doesn't mean that I have to explain anything. It means I trust someone more than I trust my doubts. That someone happens to be a God who has both an immeasurable mind and heart. I know I want the latter. I'll take the former as well because I need that, too.

**What are you struggling to believe?** I haven't even listed all the things we struggle to believe, have I? I don't need to do this. You can fill in that blank. I might not even mention yours anyway.

This much I know, though. If you have any kind of meaningful faith, you struggle at times. My hope and prayer are that your struggle helps you develop spiritual muscles you have never had and strengthens your faith. I also hope it takes you to a new level in your relationship with God, the “My Lord and my God” level!