

John 20:19-21, 24-29 (New Revised Standard Version)

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

1 Peter 01:3-9,13 (New Revised Standard Version)

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed.

As of at least a few years ago, it appears that someone at the Greenville, SC, Dept. of Social Services believed in resurrection enough to send a letter that said, "Your food stamps will be stopped effective immediately because we have received notice that you have passed away. You may reapply however, if there is a change in your circumstances."

But according to the passage we read from John, Thomas was not so easily convinced, vs. 20b, 24-25

The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

Thomas knew that after a Roman scourging, crucifixion and burial, people generally don't come back alive, and so he is adamant, unless I can see, touch and feel, I will not believe -- -- show me some evidence and only then will I believe.

Now there are different kinds of doubt and doubters in this world.

Sometimes rigid and deliberate disbelief masquerades as doubt. Having already made up their mind they refuse to see or reconsider,

and so no amount of evidence, facts or data can dissuade them from what they've already decided to believe & accept as truth.

But Thomas had a different sort of doubt, he had **doubt with integrity**—
- just show me the data, let me evaluate the facts and evidence,
- show me the risen Lord, and then I will believe.
The Lord honors and graciously responds to that kind of doubt,
... which is the grace we see in this post-resurrection story.

Our focus today occurs the week after Easter Sunday,
his 2nd appearance to the gathered disciples again.

Only this time Thomas is among those gathered in fellowship, vs. 26-28

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

"My Lord and my God!"

That's the strongest and most explicit affirmation of faith to be found anywhere in the whole gospel of John.

From his prior position of questioning, denial and doubt, now Thomas speaks this most sure and certain statement of faith.

It's clear that Jesus was resurrected from the dead, but I do find it somewhat curious

that his resurrected body was still scarred and wounded, for surely God could have fully restored his human body.

I see that as much like my own experience of grief and tragic loss, in that over time we do gradually heal and can learn to accept and live with our wounds & losses, our hurts and limitations...

... but the scars remain and remind.

We also notice that Jesus does not condemn Thomas for having doubts, but rather Jesus willingly responds to his request, and gives Thomas exactly what he needs to see, to touch...
... whatever it takes for Thomas to believe.

As I have read and studied this passage, and having observed how difficult it can be for some people to accept and believe, I've often thought how much simpler evangelism would be if God had made faith and believing a little bit easier.

But I'm pretty sure that it's all a part of God's plan and purpose, a deliberate process necessary for our spiritual development.

In fact for many if not most people, **an authentic and committed faith**, often includes some periods of doubt, questioning and exploration.

Our honest doubt and uncertainties are actually **a gift from God**, an invitation to explore further along our spiritual journey as we search for truth and a deeper walk with our Lord Jesus, **which then equips us to trust & flourish even amid the storms of life.**

To doubt can mean that we're taking God seriously, & not frivolously.

By exploring our own faith and walking our own spiritual journey, we're doing more than blindly accepting **the faith of someone else.**

God wants a relationship with us of trust built through experience
and for us to actually know our God in a deep and personal way,
and for us **by choice** to walk **with our God who loves us** ...
...and it will be through our struggles with honest questions of doubt
that we can come **to know and love our God in that more personal way.**

I also believe, with deliberate intent & purpose toward our growth,
God may give us **more than we can handle**, including messy doubts,
which **forces** us to learn about trust & reliance on the Lord alone,
as we are learning to recognize and to respond to
God's grace at work in our lives and in this world.

When my sister was a young teenager, my parents gave her
a large wooden chest that my great, great grandfather had made,
which was to be her "hope chest" for storing household items,
in preparation for the home & family she envisioned, yet to be.

That hope chest was a tangible expression of my sister's dreams,
as something visible, tangible and reliably certain
moving toward something expected **and sure to come later.**

Though it wouldn't to be completed until sometime off in the future,
it was **something that was already starting to happen in the present.**

Several years ago a promising young man was about to graduate, and
knowing he wasn't receiving much support or encouragement at home,
I got involved and challenged him to think about what
sort of man he wanted to become & achieve with his life.

I encouraged him to get all the education he could,
and be a man of high morals, integrity and good character
whose walk of faith continues to grow, deepen and mature
toward a productive and meaningful life and career ...

... and not so much just for his own sake and satisfaction,
**but for the well-being of his future family,
the wife and children he hoped to have someday.**

The point was, that the choices he was making at that point in his life
and by his response to the blessings and challenges of his life,
were about working toward something that wasn't present now,
but yet was very real, something he could expect later...
... so strive now toward the family and good life he wanted someday.

That is also a picture of our Christian life of faith, growth & hope.

The grace we've received is a foretaste of God's ongoing work,
as the Lord continues to deepen our faith, as in 1 Peter vs. 8-9

Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, **you believe in him**
and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving **the outcome of your faith**, the salvation
of your souls.

1st Peter was written during a difficult time of severe persecution.

when Emperor Nero was attempting to crush and destroy Christianity,
& Christians were suffering & struggling under his persecution,

and yet this is a word of hope and celebration!

The focus of 1st Peter is how the resurrection of Jesus from the dead
can give us courage and hope amid our present difficulties
moving us toward our future as promised by the Lord, vs. 1~5,

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth **into a living hope** through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and **into an inheritance** that is **imperishable, undefiled, and unfading**, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

“Blessed be God”, may seem like a very odd perspective to write

to someone during a time of intense persecution and suffering,

**but the point is, because we do trust, we can have confidence & hope
in joyful anticipation of the fulfillment of God’s promises,
which then enables us to live fully and boldly in the present.**

“an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading” - by definition, an inheritance is always a gift and never something we have earned.

imperishable,

meaning it can’t be damaged, lost or destroyed.

undefiled,

meaning it can’t be tainted by evil or sin.

and unfading

meaning it can be tarnished or diminished over time.

Our Christian life with Jesus is about that wonderful vision,
of having hope even in the face of struggles and suffering
and reliance not on the visible and understandable,
but rather, trusting in an unseen inheritance that
is promised and given by **our unseen Lord and Savior.**

Though in the present we’re not immune or exempt from suffering,
and no, we do not escape the trials and troubles of this world...
... yet seen from our distinctly Christian perspective,

we are sustained by hope and trust in God’s promises,
that await fulfillment as our reliable inheritance,
which gives us courage, confidence and reassurance...

... because we know that through our struggles, trials and troubles,
God is accomplishing something in us that is purposeful, vs. 6-7

In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is **tested by fire**—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Our struggles are the way that God enlarges our vision and hope,
just as a good teacher uses research papers and testing,
to help their students grow and learn to think more deeply--
--much like the way gold is tested and purified by fire.

Our God uses even the hard struggles, trials & troubles of our lives,
all of our experiences for our benefit toward Christian maturity,
**by challenging our easy answers and assumptions,
causing our spiritual development to grow deeper.**

By our struggles we can learn to trust and depend on the Lord, alone.

It's also an essential part of growing our authentic Christian faith,
that's deepened by asking & confronting the hard questions of faith,
within the community of faith, inquiry within our church family,
where we can work out our answers with God and with each other...
... which leads to how this passage concerning Thomas applies to us.

1st, God was faithful and provided for Thomas' doubt and questioning.
Notice that Jesus does not condemn Thomas for having doubted,
but rather Jesus stoops down and meets him where he was,
to give Thomas exactly what he needs to see, to touch...
... whatever it took for Thomas to believe.

2nd, On that the Sunday after Easter, though Thomas doubted,
yet he was still right there with the other disciples.
still welcome, accepted & included in their fellowship,
even though they didn't all agree or believe.

It is critically important that the other disciples didn't
reject, exclude or excommunicate him even when he doubted.
They gave him **time enough** and **room enough** to explore for himself,
trusting God's wisdom & grace to provide what he needed to believe.
trusting that in time he would experience their risen Lord.

If someone is not quite where we are along **their** spiritual journey-
we must be a safe and caring place, a supportive encouraging place,
and we must offer compassion and patient listening hearts
for a Thomas to seek the Lord and explore their faith...

... trusting that the Lord will by grace at the appropriate time
accomplish the growth, nurture and development of their faith,
all according to God's will and purpose, God's plan **for them.**

3rd, let us each, with courage and hope, with confidence and trust,
grapple with hard questions that maybe don't have easy answers,
since that is how our faith deepens and grows more authentic...

... for if our proclamation is going to be **relevant to our culture**,
then surely we must each have the experience and confidence
of addressing our own questions and doubt **with integrity**,
so we can respond to the questions our world is asking.

Today, I want to consider the effect of God's grace on how I am living,
and if my attitude and my behavior are being influenced
by my hope in the future fulfillment of God's promises,
and are consistent with how Jesus would have me live?

So how do I usefully cooperate with God toward making a difference,
and that most helps strengthen and deepen my walk with my Lord?...
... for whatever it is that God's up to & accomplishing,
I certainly want to be in on it & serving faithfully...

so that at the end,

the life I've will be something I do want to talk about with God.

Here is the hope and promise upon which we can rely from Eph. 3:20-21

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine,

to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.