

AWAKENED FROM DOUBT

God's Dealings with Thomas

By Steve Zeisler

Last week, a waitress in Fort Worth, Texas was quoted as saying, "He may be a crook, but he's our crook, and we're proud of him." She was speaking of her congressman, the recently retired Speaker of the House, Jim Wright. As the papers have reported his woes before the Ethics Committee of the House of Representatives, it is dear that Jim Wright was brought down because the facts kept getting in the way. He attempted to show that his actions were not fraudulent, noting that, "Everybody's doing it," and, "No one used to pay attention to these things before," and, "I wish it hadn't happened." The discussions, however, kept uncovering the fact that choices had been made that were unethical. Truth has a way of staking its claim on the thinking of people.

Another issue receiving publicity lately centers on whether scientists in Utah have discovered a process by which nuclear fusion can take place at room temperature. There is some evidence to support these claims by additional experimentation done at Stanford, but as yet the findings are inconclusive. There are fulminations and accusations by physicists and chemists, attacks on one another, and differences of opinion. Enduring fame and fortune are at stake. Once again, the issue is going to turn on the truth. Either fusion is taking place or it is not.

If fusion can in fact be generated at room temperature tremendous projections are being made for the future. If the claims are true, many of our most stubborn problems will be resolved. It will give us a cheap source of energy that can be exported anywhere in the world. It will raise living standards globally, clean up the environment, and reduce the need for economic and political competition that can lead to war. So every right-thinking person hopes the power of nuclear fusion has been harnessed. Everything hangs on whether the facts line up with our hopes.

IS THE GOSPEL TRUE?

The Christian faith is based on a wonderful story of marvelous implications, the claim that a miracle has taken place. The Christian sacrament of communion testifies that the death of Jesus Christ was an act of God to set free a race enslaved to sin. We experience forgiveness of sin, newness of heart, and removal of shame through our acceptance in Christ. His death was vindicated by the resurrection, what the Scriptures called the power of an indestructible life. It is a miracle, and yet it is proper to question its validity. Do the facts support the claims we make about who Christ was and the miracle of his resurrection from the dead nearly 2000 years ago? To answer this question we will look at life through eyes of the disciple named Thomas, who struggled with the testimony of others and determined to discover the facts on his own.

In this series of messages, I have been examining various individuals in both the Old and New Testament who experienced the Lord in a revolutionary way at a critical point in their life. Thomas will ask a pertinent question that will be answered personally by his Lord: Is the gospel message true? Did Jesus rise from the dead by the power of God, announcing his sacrifice had been accepted?

We also want to look at the other individuals in John 20. There are four main figures in the resurrection accounts (chapters 20, 21) of John's gospel. Filling in details that the synoptic writers had left available to him, John wrote with a bit more intimacy and detail about the people involved. The four figures are Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved (John's reference to himself), Mary Magdalene, and Thomas. Last week we talked about Jesus' ministry of renewal to Peter in John 21. The question Peter asked the Lord was: Is the

gospel message really powerful? Is it sufficient to take away the shame, failure, unworthiness, and weakness that besets me? Peter knew the gospel was true. He needed confirmation in his hearts of hearts, however, that it had power.

Likewise, we will hear John ask: Is the good news really good? Is it a tragedy or is it a profoundly good story? Then Mary Magdalene will query:

Is it personal? Does it reach down and meet the intimate and deep needs of a person like me? Finally, we will come to Thomas' quandary: Is it true? I believe that John's account of the resurrection is intended to answer these questions.

THE EMPTY TOMB

Beginning in verse 1, we will see events that will focus on John, the apostle whom Jesus loved:

Now on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb while it was still dark, and saw the stone already taken away from the tomb. And so she ran and came to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him."

From the accounts of the resurrection in the other gospels it is apparent that the Sabbath had intervened after Jesus' death, before his body could be properly prepared for burial. Therefore, a group of women had gone early on Sunday morning to anoint the body of Jesus that had been laid in the tomb. Evidently, as they drew near, Mary Magdalene saw that the stone had been rolled away from the tomb. Panicking and expecting the worst, she ran back immediately to report to Peter what she feared. The other women continued on to the tomb, and spoke to an angel who was at the site. He told them not to fear, there was a good reason for the stone to be rolled away: Jesus had risen.

Unaware of the other women's encounter with the angel, Mary subsequently returned to the garden and later met the Lord. Since she had run back to Peter before she knew what had occurred, her first notion was that the terrible tragedy of Jesus' death was being compounded by the desecration of his body. She feared that Jesus' enemies would not even allow him to stay buried, but had taken his body to mistreat what remained.

At her announcement, Peter and John, went running to the garden tomb. John arrived first, but was hesitant. Peter therefore went forth, and the other disciple, and they were going to the tomb. And the two were running together; and the other disciple ran ahead faster than Peter, and came to the tomb first; and stooping and looking in, he saw the linen wrappings lying there; but he did not go in. Simon Peter therefore also came, following him, and entered the tomb; and he beheld the linen wrappings lying there, and the face-cloth, which had been on his head, not lying with the linen wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself. So the other disciple who had first come to the tomb entered then also, and he saw and believed. For as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise again from the dead. So the disciples went away again to their own homes.

THE BEGINNING OF BELIEF

Verse 8 is a key point in the passage. John "saw and believed" when he looked in and observed the grave clothes were left as if the body had been raised out of them. Grave robbers would have torn the wrappings and left them in a pile jumbled together. With the evidence in front of him, he concluded that what had occurred was not something terrible. On the contrary, he began to believe that something wonderful had happened, although he did not fully understand the implications.

John had loved and followed Jesus Christ. He had heard him teach and seen him do the miraculous. He was certain that Jesus was Messiah and had given his life to him. Suddenly, on that fateful Passover, the Jews and Romans laid rough hands on Christ, dragged him away, put him through a kangaroo court, and crucified him like a common criminal. Although John viewed Jesus as a godly, charismatic leader, he must have questioned

the Lord's power to arrest the course of sin. After all, Jesus' enemies had killed him. With Mary's pronouncement, John faced the dismal fact that not only had God abandoned Jesus to death, but he did not even protect his body. The possibility that his enemies had taken it and thrown it into Gehenna, the garbage dump where corpses were burned with the trash, was the worst possible news. Yet John went to the tomb, looked in, and "he saw and believed."

In verse 9, it is important to note that none of the disciples understood the Scriptures to this point. John is noting a problem—one which Jesus addresses directly in his post-resurrection appearances. John began to believe when he saw the empty tomb what he could have believed all along. The suffering and eventual triumph of Messiah were the choice of God and were declared to be so ahead of time. The risen Lord reminded them that he had told them ahead of time that he was going to die. His enemies had no power to take his life; it was he who gave his life freely for the sins of mankind. From the beginning it was God's plan for man's salvation, a promise that was clear in Scripture. God had not lost his grip on the circumstances, but had carried out his plan to give man eternal life with him.

THE WITNESS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

In Luke 24:13-32 two disciples were walking on a road to Emmaus, talking about the events of Jesus' death and resurrection, when a man joined them. He began to unfold the Scriptures to them, beginning with Moses and going all the way through the prophets of the Old Testament. When he left them, they realized they had been with the Lord, and reported back to the disciples. They said, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" Jesus drew aside the truth of the Old Testament to show that this was not bad news, this was part of the plan of God, his good news for mankind. Luke 24:44, 45 says that on that first Sunday night when he met with his followers, he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you that all the things that are written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their mind to understand the Scriptures.

When John raced to the tomb and stooped in to see, he began to believe. At the end of the day he saw the risen Lord, and Jesus opened his mind to understand the Scriptures. Fearing the worst, all of the disciples had scattered when their Shepherd was struck down. Ultimately, however, they found that the information about the empty tomb was not bad news, but the best news possible. God has acted on our behalf. He has accepted the sacrifice of his son, and thus we are no longer responsible for our sin.

ALL THINGS WORK TOGETHER FOR GOOD

In our church tonight, a film will be shown and a testimony will be given by Charlie Wedemeyer, a football coach in the area who has Lou Gehrig's disease. After eleven years of suffering, the disease has left him totally immobilized except for slight movement of his lips. His wife and a nurse are the only ones who can read his lips, and they translate his testimony for him in a given setting. Previously an athletic, energetic man, Charlie came to Christ as a result of this tragic disease. In an interview I read recently, he said, "I used to pray to be healed. I don't pray to be healed anymore, I pray to be used."

What Charlie has learned is the essence of what John learned by looking in the tomb. What appears to be horrible turns out to be wonderful. We know the words of Scripture in James 1:2, "Count it all joy, brethren, when you encounter various trials," and Romans 8:28, "All things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purposes." Yet at times we live with pain and difficulty. We live with circumstances that are hard to bear. In spite of what we see around us, we, too, must conclude that the plan of God has not gone awry. The end of the story for everyone who knows Jesus Christ is glory, not tragedy.

Recently, an old friend confided in me that he has undergone a rude awakening. Six months ago he thought he had a happy family. However, since then his wife has been overtaken by a mid-life crisis, and she has run off to the mountains to find her identity. She will have nothing to do with her husband as she is going through this discovery process. Simultaneously, his high school-aged daughter has started going steady with a juvenile delinquent and has centered her life around this person and his activities. My friend's world has been turned upside down. He has had to admit to himself that he was greedy and harsh with his family—more than he

realized. They have now turned away from him. He calls me regularly in tears asking, "What should I do, what should I say?" There are only hard answers: There is nothing he can say. For the time being he no longer has access to speak to his wife. The day may come when God gives it back to him, but for now he has to trust that his sovereign Lord knows what he is doing. My friend has lessons to learn about himself, that "all things work together for good for those who love the Lord and are called according to his purpose." It is the story that has been asked time and again, whether by Charlie Wedemeyer, or my friend, or John the apostle. Although the circumstances look terrible, the evidence is in the Scriptures that God remains at work, and therefore the good news remains good.

A PERSONAL GOSPEL

Mary Magdalene asked a different question: Is the gospel personal? What about people who do not want to know where it fits into the grand scheme of things? What about people whose inner hearts are filled with pain and hurt, who long for an intimate touch from a loving God, but do not know where to get answers?

When Mary came back to the garden after speaking with Peter, she had a divine encounter. In verse 11:

Mary was standing outside the tomb weeping; and so, as she wept, she stooped and looked into the tomb; and she beheld two angels in white sitting, one at the head, and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying. And they said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him." When she had said this, she turned around, and beheld Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing Him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (which means, Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Stop clinging to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren, and say to them, 'I ascend to my father and your father, and my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene came, announcing to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord," and that he had said these things to her.

From other Scriptures, we have some knowledge about who Mary Magdalene was. Traditionally, she is linked with the woman of Luke 7:38, a sinner who anointed Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. From Luke 8:2, we know certainly that she had been possessed by seven demons. Jesus had banished the evil spirits from her and restored her mental health. I do not have extensive experience with direct demonic oppression, but what I know suggests that it is terrible to endure. It is defiling to be inhabited by absolute wickedness. It communicates a sense of powerlessness and uncleanness. Mary had lived with seven demons residing in her, and Jesus had cleansed her. He knew her intimately and took the tragedy and self-hatred that had marked her life and gave her hope.

Mary had focused her existence on Jesus, and now his enemies had killed him. The one thing she wanted to do in his memory to express her love was to make sure that he was anointed and buried properly. Those who hated him had not stopped with killing him (she thought), but had desecrated him as well, stealing with him her intentions to bury him respectfully.

HE KNEW HER NAME

In her distress, Mary did not recognize Jesus. A recurring theme in these post-resurrection accounts is that people do not immediately recognize the Lord in his raised body. Although he was the same Lord, he had been transformed so that it was not quickly apparent who he was until he said her name. The personalizing of his ministry to her was his voice saying her name, "Mary." It was the same voice that had cleansed her from defilement of the demons, reached inside of her heart and made her new, giving her beauty for ashes. She clung to his feet, "Rabboni, Teacher."

During our courtship, my wife toured Europe for three months. We occasionally wrote letters, but more often we sent tapes to one another during her absence. I remember playing those tapes repeatedly, just to hear her

voice. Despite the miles between us, she was with me through her spoken word.

One of the wonderful perquisites that come with being a pastor is performing weddings. I have the best seat in the house to experience two people in love share their vows of commitment. Sometimes the words are inaudible to everyone else, but I am able to hear them speak each other's name in promise to the other. It is a compelling moment.

As Jesus said this woman's name, everything changed for her. The gospel became personal. It was not only good news, it was meant specifically for her. Her fear that she had lost what was important to her changed to the certainty that she had gained everything.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUTH

For us, however, one question remains: Is it true? Granted, it is a beautiful story that engenders warm religious feelings. If it is true, however, the implications are staggering. If Jesus was raised from the dead by the power of God the Father, it means that his sacrifice was deemed acceptable by the Almighty. Therefore our sins have been forgiven, and we have hope and newness of life.

We need to see the resurrection through the eyes of the last individual in John 20, Thomas the Twin. Verse 19:

When therefore it was evening, on that day, the first day of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst, and said to them, "Peace be with you." And when he had said this, he showed them both his hands and his side. The disciples therefore rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus therefore said to them again, "Peace be with you; as the Father has sent me, I also send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained."

At this great occasion, some of Christ's followers were gathered together and sharing about their experiences with the risen Lord. Suddenly, Jesus stood among them and identified himself through the scars on his hands and in his side. Twice he told them to receive his peace. Finally, he breathed on them and gave them a ministry to declare forgiveness of sins.

One of the eleven remaining apostles, Thomas, was not present. We must continue in John 20:24 to hear his story:

But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore were saying to him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I shall see in his hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

And after eight days again his disciples were inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors having been shut, and stood in their midst, and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Reach here your finger, and see my hands; and reach here your hand, and put it into my side; and be not unbelieving, but believing." Thomas answered and said to him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "because you have seen me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed."

THE HARD-HEADED APOSTLE

Thomas is a fascinating character in the New Testament. Through the few Scriptures that mention him we can tell that Thomas was the kind of person who might have been a scientist if he had been born in the twentieth century. He was basically the hard-headed sort, one who did not have a go-along-with-crowd mentality. Thomas was not much influenced by his peers or what they thought of him. In the fourteenth chapter of John, before his death Jesus said, "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going." Everyone else stood there with a blank look on their face, but Thomas said, "Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how

can we know the way?" He did not care if he appeared obtuse or foolish, he cared about understanding the statement. He would not accept that which he did not understand.

Thomas was an iconoclast. He was not given to religious emotions nor did he look for comfort in a circle of fellow sufferers. That might be one of the reasons he did not associate with the disciples at that first meeting. As far as he knew Jesus was dead and gone. It was not necessary for his well being to go to the meeting to share tragic memories, and to receive and give support at that time.

Thomas's shortcoming was that he would not believe the testimony of the people whom he should have trusted. He was the kind of man who saw things in black and white, and was somewhat of a pessimist. I think of him as similar to a figure in C.S. Lewis' *Narnia Chronicles*, the marshwiggle Puddleglum, who was forever negative in his assessment of circumstances. Like Puddleglum, Thomas was fearless and courageous to the core. When his doubts were removed, no one exceeded him in his commitment to Christ. In John 11, when Jesus determined that he was going to go to Judea to raise Lazarus, his disciples tried to dissuade him because of the imminent danger and threat of stoning by the Jews. Thomas is the one who said, "Let us also go that we may die with him." He did not understand Jesus' plan, but the only choice was to follow Christ, even into possible death.

THOMAS' DOUBTS REMOVED

In response to Thomas's obstinacy, Jesus graciously came and met him a week later. When his doubts were removed, Thomas fell to his knees and offered a great statement of worship for Christ: "My Lord and my God!"

I think Thomas plays a critical role for subsequent generations of Christians. Like a modern scientist, he would not believe without having hard evidence. He was committed to the Jesus Christ he had known, and would accept no substitutes. His integrity kept him from accepting another's testimony about the Savior's resurrection without first-hand experience. Hard-headed pessimists in every generation were represented at the first Easter. Those of us in this century who are stubborn in seeking a basis for our beliefs can have confidence because Jesus convinced the first tough-minded critic. We have the evidence of his testimony and an illustration that the Lord will condescend to genuine doubters who are willing to believe.

The gospel is good news. It was the plan of God from the beginning to save man from his sin. As John learned, the empty tomb is not a tragedy but the heart of God's plan. It is good news because God accepted Jesus' sacrifice as the sin bearer and raised him from the dead. As we saw last week in Peter's case, it is powerful and takes away the pain of unworthiness that plagues humanity. As Mary Magdalene learned, it is so personal that the name of the believer is known. The Lord offers us intimacy through his understanding and acceptance of our weakness.

The hymn that we sing "He Lives," says, "You ask me how I know he lives, he lives within my heart." That is one piece of evidence, but that is not the only one. "You ask me how I know he lives?" The tomb was empty, that is also how I know he lives. He was seen by his followers. The scars were in his hand. There is historical evidence that the resurrection is true. Jesus in his gracious ministry to the skeptic, made himself available, and thus Thomas had his needs for hard evidence met by a personal encounter with Jesus Christ

John probably intended at first to end his gospel with chapter 20, verses 30 and 31, but he later added Jesus' encounter with Peter as a postscript.

John's conclusion in verses 30 and 31 raises an important challenge:

Many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in his name.

The last of the signs that John had recorded to this point was the appearance to Thomas. Jesus performed other signs, miracles, and teachings. He had proven himself throughout the course of his public ministry to be who

he had said he was. The gospel is clear in its message, and the choice to have life in his name is ours to make. If you are not a Christian, the choice means giving yourself to Jesus Christ in the simplest of prayers and accepting his forgiveness of your sin. Having life in his name, if you are a Christian, means giving him access to those areas of rebellion and uncertainty, those things about you that you have withheld from him. Given the truth, our choice is to believe. I challenge you to set aside doubt and resistance, "That believing you may have life in his name."

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