



## “Behind Closed Doors”

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*John 20:19-29*

In one of my favorite novels, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, the narrator, John, had a number of conversations with his friend Owen Meany about the meaning of belief. In one scene at the schoolyard, Owen illustrated his faith in God by pointing to a gray, granite statue of Mary Magdalene as the dimness of twilight began to fall. When it became so dark that the statue was no longer visible, Owen asked John if he knew that the statue was still there. John said that of course he knew. Owen kept pushing:<sup>1</sup>

“YOU HAVE NO DOUBT SHE’S THERE?” [Owen] nagged me.

“Of course, I have no doubt!” I said.

“BUT YOU CAN’T SEE HER—YOU COULD BE WRONG,” he said.

“No, I’m not wrong—she’s there, I know she’s there!” I yelled at him.

“YOU ABSOLUTELY KNOW SHE’S THERE—EVEN THOUGH YOU CAN’T SEE HER,” he asked me?

“Yes,” I screamed.

“WELL, NOW YOU KNOW HOW I FEEL ABOUT GOD,” said Owen Meany.

“I CAN’T SEE HIM—BUT I ABSOLUTELY KNOW HE IS THERE!”<sup>2</sup>

I believe the author of the Gospel of John would have loved Owen Meany and would have celebrated his extravagant and complete faith. Owen didn’t need to see; he didn’t need signs or wonders; he believed and lived his life in the assurance of that faithful conviction.

Now that doesn’t sound quite like the belief we get from Thomas in the Gospel reading this morning, does it? But [Thomas] 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 needed to see; he needed signs and wonders; he needed to touch the impression of the nails in Jesus’ wrists and the depression of the spear made in Jesus’ side before he would believe. And, for this reason, he is often referred to as “Doubting Thomas.”

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<sup>1</sup> Intro from *Feasting on the Word*

<sup>2</sup> John Irving, *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), 451.

Growing up in several Southern Baptist churches in Nashville, Tennessee, I remember many gloomy doubting Thomas sermons. The pastor couldn't wait to tell a defenseless congregation, still hungover from Easter hope, about how bad of a guy Thomas was. These pastors emphasized that when the other disciples, the women and men who followed Jesus, told Thomas that Jesus was alive, that he was ultimately stubborn and refused to believe his good friends. They would preach that Thomas separated himself from the others like a sulking child and demanded to see Christ for himself. In short, they would try to guilt their congregations by telling them how dull and disbelieving this doubting follower of Christ was. It feels as if the lectionary creators don't want to give us the benefit of the doubt... that we simply don't have the capacity to hold on to hope for one mere week after Easter. "Don't be like Thomas! Don't doubt!"

And so, if I were to follow in the footsteps of the pastors of my childhood and youth, my sermon today should encourage you to be the opposite of Thomas. My sermon would ask you to believe without seeing, just like Owen Meany. I would probably be very hard on doubting Thomas. I would emphasize the importance of belief, the assurance of Jesus' presence following the resurrection, and the need for faithful Christians in the world today. That sounds like a good sermon to preach right after Easter when we are running on the adrenaline of the resurrection and power of the living Christ.

Is that you? Were you so filled to the brim with faith last week that you don't feel even the least bit tired, frustrated, or scared? Have you lived without doubt, hurt, or loneliness since Easter? Yeah, neither have I... in fact I had a very tough week and I, like the disciples after Jesus's death, wanted to hide behind closed and locked doors just to keep the onslaught of life from overwhelming me. I can't preach on the unbelief of Thomas this morning because I am a "doubting Thomas." We have all been "Thomases" this week. We have all been like the disciples who were too scared to come out from behind closed doors, even after receiving word from Mary Magdalene that Jesus was alive—even after seeing Jesus face to face and being breathed upon by the Spirit of resurrection.

As we look closely at the text, we realize that Thomas is a practical, no-nonsense sort of guy, even though he is cautious and has some doubts. As you remember earlier in John's Gospel, Thomas insisted that the disciples accompany Jesus when he went to Bethany, a place he left under threat of being stoned to death. Thomas supported Jesus's apparently suicidal return trip saying, "Let us also go that we

may die with him." And later, in the midst of Jesus' long farewell discourse, Thomas cut through Jesus's mystical, poetic, convoluted, and downright baffling language. Jesus assured his followers, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places . . . where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going," to which Thomas retorted, "Lord, we don't really know what you just said there... so how can we possibly know where you are going? Jesus, you are so frustrating!" Thomas was closed off behind the doors of doubt; and he had no reservations about saying so.

Thomas was also not with the others on the evening of that first Easter. Yet, I don't think it was because he was trying to be difficult, petulant, or sulky. Since we ourselves are Thomases, we know he was probably grieving, scared, and confused. He had every right to be cautious, to not be duped or pulled into the excitement. He wanted to see Jesus for himself. He wanted a piece of the miracle. He wanted to fall in love with the resurrected Jesus rather than the disciples' ghost story. He was a realist. He wanted proof.

Erik Weihenmayer, the blind mountaineer who successfully scaled Mount Everest, wrote about his journey in *Outside* magazine:

*A few days after I arrived in the Khumbu Valley for the Mount Everest climb, a rumor began circulating. Because I wasn't flopping on my face every few minutes, the Sherpas thought I was lying about my blindness. Women would approach me in the alleys of Namche Bazaar and wave their hands in front of my face. I'd feel the wind and flinch, which only confirmed their suspicions. Finally, I resorted to drastic measures. I asked Kami Tenzing, our climbing guide, into the kitchen tent. "Kami," I said, "I want to give you a message to take back to the Sherpas." I pulled down my left lower eyelid, leaned my head forward, and my prosthetic eye plopped into my palm. "I can take the other out if you want," I said. "No!" he said firmly. "Not necessary."*

Maybe Thomas was the same way. When Jesus finally appeared to him, he said, "Put your finger here and feel my wounds. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." I'm sure Thomas was reacting much like the climbing guide... "Whoa! No thanks! That's not necessary!" Sometimes it takes a while to come out from behind the closed and locked doors of our doubts. Sometimes it takes a while to be transformed. Sometimes we need to feel things in a tactile way to truly understand and accept something has changed. We are all "Doubting Thomases."

As we scour the resurrection accounts of all four gospels, we quickly realize that Thomas was not alone in his doubt. In fact, doubt wasn't the exception, doubt was the rule. No one -- even after all the predictions -- no one said, "Welcome back." Or "We knew it." Or even "What took you so long, Jesus?" No. No one anticipated Jesus's return. And when he finally showed up, everyone doubted. EVERYONE.

If we are all Thomases and live behind the closed and locked doors of doubt, fear, and grief, what can we hope to understand from this story? What if John's story of unbelief is not really about a group of doubting disciples at all, but about the powerful appearance of Jesus? What if this story is a tale about the coming of God to us? What if this story is about resurrection finding us? Resurrection finds us when we struggle to make sense of the world. Resurrection finds us when we wonder why there is a bomb in Afghanistan rather than a Balm in Gilead. Resurrection finds us when the pain of anger and shame speaks darkness into our lives. Resurrection find us behind our false securities and our foolish pride. Resurrection finds us, wherever we might be, whatever closed doors we are hiding behind.

I guess this is why the story began with an emphasis on a secret, dimly lit room with doors shut tight. Jesus didn't wait for Thomas to open the door so he could chastise him about his lack of faith. No, the author of this gospel left room for doubt; left room for Thomas; left room for us. Jesus walked through the closed and locked doors to get to Thomas. Despite the roadblocks of doubt, anger, and shame, Jesus was determined to reach this stalwart skeptic, whom no one else could convince. It was Jesus who refused to let dead bolts or grave stones block his movement of love. I believe Jesus busted through the doors and came in skin and flesh to Thomas for a reason. The disciples needed the personhood of Jesus, not just the spirit, not just the stories of his resurrection, not just the fear. They needed the body, the blood, the wounds, and smile, the eyes, and the voice of Jesus. They needed resurrection.

And we, as Easter people, must not let locks or chains, laws or pain, hate or shame keep us from bringing resurrection to the world. We are called to be the flesh and bones, we are called to be the hands and feet, we are called to be the tight hugs and the shoulders to cry on. People need a physical, bodily, wounded Jesus leaving us to be his life-giving, holy spirit breathing presence in the world. We are the boundary-breaking followers unlocking the doors, opening doors, walking through the doors, and leaving the doors behind as we go out into the world bringing hope, healing, and resurrection.

Friends, the world is full of doubting Thomases. Our communities are full of people who doubt they can pay their bills; who doubt they will live to see their children grow up; who doubt they will be treated fairly in stores, on streets, and in society; who doubt they won't get shot; who doubt they can beat depression; who doubt they will ever have any friends. The world is full of doubting Thomases. We must come out from behind locked doors and show the world that Jesus is alive; that hope is alive; that resurrection is alive; that love is alive; that kindness is alive; that justice is alive; that Jesus...is...alive!

The Easter miracle in the text today doesn't reside within the newly found faith of Thomas. The Easter miracle is that Jesus appeared again and again behind closed and locked doors to the scared and confused disciples, and that he appears again and again to us in our closed off lives. This is the good news for the Second Sunday of Easter that Resurrection will find us; Jesus will find us; Jesus will use this church, this "not closed" community to help all doubters proclaim with confidence, like the redeemed Thomas, "My Lord and my God!" Thank God, that resurrection finds us... that Jesus will come to us, all of us, again and again, even behind closed doors.

Amen.