

FROM DOUBT TO FAITH

A SERMON FOR EASTERTIDE  
SUNDAY, APRIL 12, 2015  
First Presbyterian Church  
Marianna, Florida  
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JOHN 20:19-31

In John's account of the Resurrection, Mary Magdalene, who wept at the tomb when she found it empty, and did not recognize the risen Lord until He called her by name is the central character.

Aside from Jesus, the central figure in this week's story is Thomas. The very name has come to be associated with doubting. Thomas doubted.

My friend, David Thomas, a retired professor of rhetoric, points out that Mary and Thomas are perfectly opposed to each other in this chapter of John's gospel. Mary is the feminine side, right-brained, emotional. Thomas is the masculine side, left-brained, rational. Mary's response to the death of Jesus was to weep. Her response to the horrible absence of His body from the tomb was to weep. When she saw Jesus and did not recognize Him, thinking Him to be the gardener, she even said that if he would show her where the body was, she would carry it away. Emotional, irrational, Mary. Blinded by her tears, she did not recognize the risen Lord.

Mary's response was to stay close, to cling. That's feminine. Thomas's response? Totally masculine: he went off by himself, and when he came back, he argued about something he knew nothing about.

Well, to begin with, Thomas was amongst those who ran away from the cross. We do not know where he ran, but run he did. And he hid. He did not seek the company of the other disciples, of the twelve apostles. Like a lot of men, he was a loner, private in his grief and sorrow.

And so Thomas missed it. He wasn't there in the Upper Room when Jesus appeared to the disciples. But when he heard about it, he did not believe. They told him, "We have seen the Lord." His response: "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails and place my finger in the hole, and put my hand in the wound in his side, I will not believe."

Thomas didn't weep; he argued. Just like a man, isn't it?

David Thomas points out that we are all left-brained and right-brained, that our brains do indeed have two sides, and therefore we are all both emotional and

rational, so that we vacillate in our responses between the emotion of Mary and the logic of Thomas.

Mary did not recognize Jesus until He spoke to her. That is not only emotional, it is relational. Jesus knew her name, and she knew His voice. She might not have recognized His voice when He asked her why she was weeping, but she certainly recognized it at the instant He called her name.

Thomas was like a lot of people: he would only believe what he had seen. He would only believe what he'd experienced. He could only have faith in what he knew to be true, what he knew for certain.

Over the years, I've never met a woman who did not believe in God. I have met a number of men who didn't or who doubted that God existed. These men believed only in what they could see, experience, prove scientifically.

Come to think about it, that's Dr. Temperance Brennan, the heroine of my favorite television program, *Bones*. She's a scientist, an anthropologist, and she believes only in that which can be proven, demonstrated, experienced. This puts her at odds with her partner, FBI Special Agent Seeley Booth, a Roman Catholic former altar boy. In their case, the Mary/Thomas equation is reversed, for the woman doubts, does not believe, and the man accepts on faith. But that's fiction, a television program, not reality.

Doubt and faith are not opposite sides of the same coin. They are way-stations along a journey. Many who have faith at one point in their lives find themselves doubting.

One of my mentors, professors, from my days at the University of Tennessee was the late Dr. Richard Marius. Richard Marius, an ordained Southern Baptist minister, a Harvard Ph. D., author of biographies of Thomas More and Martin Luther, experienced a time of failure of faith, of doubt, of dis-belief. But towards the end of his life, he found his faith, and returned to church not as a preacher, and he was a great one, but as a simple, humble, worshipper. The crisis of pancreatic cancer, instead of leading him away from God, led Richard Marius back to God. He knew that God had not forsaken him, would not forsake him, and that though the church and its ministers might disappoint him, might fail him, God never would.

Dr. Marius taught history. I majored in psychology and anthropology.

Yep, I was in there with those whom one of my class mates described as "those godless atheists who are trying to teach us E-volution."

But instead of science turning me away from God, it turned me towards God. When I studied Geology, it was under Dr. James Walls, an elder in Eastminster

Presbyterian Church. When I studied the geological time table, it led me not to doubt that the earth was created in seven days, but instead to ponder what is a day in the life of God?

When I studied vertebrate anatomy, I marveled that God's finger-prints, God's symmetry was all over the animal kingdom: that the number of digits in the flipper of a seal or a whale was the same as the number of fingers on my hand, and that horses used to have five toes, too. I wondered at the fact that a tiny mouse and a long-necked giraffe had the same number of vertebrae in their necks.

If I had not gone into ministry, if I had pursued the masters program in Anthropology I was offered, my life might have been very different. But it would still have been a life lived in belief rather than doubt.

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

Well, I'm blessed, but I've seen. Oh, unlike Mary and Thomas, I haven't seen the risen Lord. But I've seen His Father's fingerprints. I've seen the rainbow in the clouds and the birth of a spring lamb, and smile of a mother greeting her newborn baby. I've seen the wind blow on the face of the waters, and knew that it was the Breath of God.

Do I ever doubt? Have I ever doubted? I've doubted myself. I've doubted my own judgment. I've doubted the church, and its leaders. But doubt God? Doubt my risen Lord? Doubt that Jesus Christ is Lord and He is risen?

Somewhere, along the journey from birth to death, I arrived at the point of faith.. Doubting is a place left behind. Not to be re-visited. Maybe I was never there in the first place. Maybe I'm too stupid to doubt. Too gullible, too emotional, too right brained.

But even old Thomas, left-brained, accountant, engineer, scientist, doubter that he was, saw the Truth standing there before him, and believed.

Even doubting Thomas cried out, "My Lord and My God!"

Lord, may all who are in doubt make the journey to faith.. May we be given eyes of faith, to see the truth. In the face of death, may we see the Risen Lord. In the face of life, may we see the Living Lord. In His name, Jesus, we make this and all our prayers. Amen.