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LET THE ENGINE PULL THE TRAIN

John 20:24-31

March 9 Laurie and I were at our niece’s wedding on the True Grit ranch outside of Granbury, Texas. We were scheduled to catch a flight leaving Dallas at 10:38 that night, which would get us back to San Diego at midnight. We would get home in time to grab a few hours of sleep before getting up for church Sunday morning. Our plan was to leave the wedding a little after 7, make the hour plus drive to the airport, which would give us time to return our rental car and have close to 2 hours before our flight, which we figured would be plenty of time. Unfortunately Laurie got a cold the day before and she was not feeling well at all. Since Laurie was feeling bad we decided to leave a little earlier than we planned. As we were driving Laurie found out there was an earlier flight that we might be able to catch. It would be a little close, but it was possible. The more we thought about it, the more we wanted to do that, so now there was a little pressure. We needed to get to the airport in time to see about changing to the earlier flight. Driving in an unfamiliar city is always a challenge, so we were trusting Google maps, adhering with religious faithfulness to every direction. As we got close it was getting dark, which added to the tension. We were heading for the rental car center, and as we were driving we saw signs to it. But Google told us to ignore them. I began to doubt. Would the transportation people post misleading signs on the freeway? That seemed unlikely. Who would we trust? We decided to put our faith in Google and kept following her directions. After Google took us on what seemed like a circuitous and convoluted route, we arrived at what was clearly the rental car return area. Google took us to the entrance for our return company, only we found it was blocked. We didn’t know what to do. We kept driving, trying to find another way in, but now we were on our own. And now the clock was becoming a factor. All I knew was, I couldn’t trust Google. She had misled us. So we blundered around in the dark, trying to figure something out. I don’t even know how, but somehow we found ourselves back at the same place Google had originally taken us. I was starting to despair, thinking we’d never find a way to return the car. But we had no choice, we were on a one way road so we had to just keep going. We went right where we had been before, only this time the entrance wasn’t blocked. We were able to drive in, return the car, and made it to the airport in time to catch the earlier flight.

It was stressful when we began to doubt the one thing we trusted to get us where we needed to go. We thought we had good reason to doubt, but our doubt left us confused. It left us feeling lost and torn. Doubt can do that to you. Today we are going to look at John 20:24-31 and see the example of a man whose name is forever connected with doubt.

THOMAS HAD SERIOUS DOUBTS

Thomas was one of Jesus’ 12 chosen disciples. For reasons unknown he wasn’t with the group when Jesus first showed himself to them. When the other disciples told him that they had seen Jesus and that he was very much alive, Thomas didn’t believe it. What they were telling him was not possible. People don’t come back to life after they die. Death is a one way street. There are no U-turns on Death Street. Thomas was sure that there was no way the other guys could have seen him alive.

I don’t know what he thought had happened. Maybe he figured that in their grief and fear the rest of the group had resorted to trying some questionable mushrooms and their grip on reality was less than firm. All he knew was that what they told him could not be true. He doubted the whole story. This has earned poor Thomas the title “Doubting Thomas.”

I have a theory that Thomas’ issue was that he was a pessimist. When I was serving at a former church that had a number of other pastors on the staff, I was accused of being a pessimist. In fact they took to calling me Eeyore at times. Eeyore, of course, was the donkey in A. A. Milne’s Winnie The Pooh stories. He was a contrast to the rest of the characters in the stories. They were all mostly cheerful and positive, while poor Eeyore was the complete opposite. Poor Eeyore felt like life would always hand him the short straw.

For instance, one day he said of a cloud in the sky, “It’s the only cloud in the sky and it’s drizzling right on me. Somehow I’m not surprised.” When someone said good morning to him Eeyore answered, “Good morning. If it is a good morning, which I doubt.” But at one point Milne had Eeyore say something that I believe is the very heart of why pessimists are pessimists. He said, “I never get my hopes up, so I never get let down.” Eeyore had been disappointed too many times. So he decided he wouldn’t get his hopes up so they wouldn’t be dashed. The same was true of Thomas.

When I was in college playing baseball, we had an expression that we sometimes used. When a player on the other team hit a rocket at one of our players that hit the ground in front of our guy, occasionally it would be going so fast he wouldn’t be able to field it. We would call out “THTH!” That meant, “Too hot to handle,” meaning it would have taken a remarkable play to be able to field it. I think when Thomas heard about Jesus supposedly being alive after he had been executed, he would have said, “TGTBT.” That sounds for “Too good to be true.”

In John 11 when Jesus announced he was going back to Jerusalem the disciples said and verse 8, “But Rabbi, a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?” Jesus insisted he was going. In verse 16 Thomas said to the rest of the disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” Doesn’t that statement sound to you like it has a certain Eeyore flavor? Thomas saw no way that a trip back to the environs of Jerusalem would end in anything but “we’re all doing to die.” That’s pretty pessimistic, I would say.

When Thomas heard about Jesus being alive, that pessimism asserted itself. Jesus being alive again would be awesome, but who could believe such a thing? It was a fairy tale. So Thomas told the other disciples the only way he would ever believe Jesus was alive was if he saw him with his own two eyes. After all, seeing is believing. For Thomas to believe it, he was going to have to see it.

JESUS RESOLVED THE DOUBTS

A week went by, and there was no sign of Jesus. I wonder why not? What was Jesus doing for a week? Why wasn’t he walking around Jerusalem and Judea showing up at the homes of all the people who had believed in him? We don’t know, but for a week Thomas was thinking, “Yeah, that’s what I figured. There’s no risen Jesus.”

A week later the disciples were again together in a locked room, this time including Thomas. Once again, Jesus did his magic trick, suddenly appearing in that locked room. Again he said, “Peace to you.” I suspect that was in part because he startled them again, but also because they were still cowering in locked rooms, terrified that they would be discovered and subjected to Jesus’ fate. Jesus turned to Thomas and said, “All right, buddy, here’s your chance. I’m here now, so stick your finger in my scars and you will find out that I’m as real and as alive as you are.” Thomas could see with his own eyes that Jesus was real and alive. He’d seen him do mind blowing things. But this was the climax of all of it. All of the disciples, Thomas included, loved Jesus, were confident that he was the Messiah, knew he had divine power, but were not completely sure what that all meant. In that one moment it hit Thomas like a thunderclap. He saw who Jesus really is. He fell on his face and cried out, “My Lord and my God!”

Thomas had loved Jesus, admired him, followed him, but now he worshiped him. Now he got the full picture. This is Almighty God revealing himself in human form. This is the One the one to whom all glory and honor and praise belongs. And Thomas, no doubt chagrined at his meager faith up to that moment, worshiped him in humility with all his heart.

It was great that Thomas now whole heartedly believed in Jesus as not some political Messiah, but as the Savior of the world, the Lord of all. But Jesus said in verse 29, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” He was talking about people like us. Jesus said there are going to be many, many people who have never seen or touched the risen Lord Jesus, but believe in him anyway. There have been and are today massively more people who believe without seeing than there are those who believed because they saw Jesus.

Hebrews 11:1 says, “Faith is the confidence in what we hope for and the assurance about what we do not see.” That’s where we have trouble. Faith is the assurance about what we do not see. Well who can be sure about something if they can’t see it? I’ve never seen an atom in my life, but I believe in them. I’ve never seen a radio wave, but I believe in them. I’ve never seen a Padres team win the world championship. Well, actually I have trouble believing in that one, so never mind.

IMPLICATIONS

DOUBT HAS DOWNSIDES

Doubt is a reality for all of us. It would be great if we had undeniable proof, concrete, irrefutable evidence that we could see that God exists, that Jesus was God revealing himself in human form, that God is active in our world, that we will indeed live again even if we die because we have faith in Jesus. It would be wonderful if we had absolute certainty about all those truths about God. But it is not quite that absolute. There are times when all of us have at least some level of doubt.

There are several kinds of doubts, and we will at some point have to deal with all of them. There is intellectual doubt. Can the Bible really be true? Is God really there? Did Jesus really rise from that tomb? Is heaven real? These are questions all of us must work through. The Bible says Mary was a virgin when Jesus was born. Did that really happen? There was the story from Jesus’ life when he cast out demons from a man, and they entered a herd of pigs, who promptly ran into a lake and drowned. Really? Doesn’t that seem like a weird story, a superstitious legend? In the Old Testament there are some big pills to swallow, from the life of Elisha, for instance. In 2 Kings 2 there’s a story where a large group of men taunted and cursed Elisha. They called him old bald head, but it wasn’t about his lack of hair, it was about his supposed role as a prophet. The passage tells us Elisha cursed the group and 2 bears suddenly showed up and attacked the group, mauling 42 of them. Yeah, that makes sense. Doubts anyone?

There is spiritual doubt. Am I really forgiven? Jesus said his Spirit would be in me, but it doesn’t always feel like it, does it? Does God really love me? It can be hard to believe that at times. Then there is circumstantial doubt. When life hands us losses and hurts and disappointments, we can easily question whether God is there. We want God to show up in some dramatic way in life and when he doesn’t it is easy to question. Laurie gave me a book called, *High Calling*. It tells the true story of a man named Rick Husband, who dreamed of being an astronaut since he was 4 years old. It relates how that dream controlled his life. He became a remarkable man, absurdly accomplished. But at one point he turned his life, including his dream of being an astronaut, over to God. He was a truly godly man who was respected by everyone who knew him for his humility, his abilities, his compassion and caring for others and his leadership. He did become an astronaut. He was given command of a mission on the space shuttle. The book was written by his wife, Evelyn. She wrote that on the morning the shuttle was returning from its 16 day mission there was early fog at the landing site. She wrote, “I prayed that God would lift the fog so Rick and the crew could make a safe landing, the kind Rick had trained and prayed for.” She showed her daughter, Laura, a video Rick had made for her for that day. On it he prayed, “Lord, thank you for bringing us to this point in the journey that our family has taken toward this mission. I pray that you’ll be with us in the shuttle and help us to have a great entry and landing today. We look forward to being back together as a family again.” The date was February 1, 2003. Rick was the commander of the shuttle *Columbia*, which broke up after reentry, with the loss of all on board. Rick never was back together with his family. He was a rare, highly admired follower of Jesus. He and his family prayed, and those prayers were not answered. Where was God in that?

Doubt is not a pleasant thing. In James 1:6 after telling us when we encounter hard times we should ask God for the wisdom that will enable us to obey him in the middle of it all, James said, “But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.” In verse 8 he said, “Such a person is double minded and unstable in all they do.” He’s right. Being double minded, being undecided, leaves you uncertain, easily swayed by other people.

When we doubt, we hold back. We don’t go all in. If we doubt God, we hold back from trusting him completely. That keeps us from being totally committed, totally passionate about something. I think about poor Laurie before we got engaged. She was only a teenager, and she found herself in this relationship with this strange man. She didn’t know what in the world to do with him for quite a while. Then she got to the place where she knew she loved him, but she was still a teenager. What was she supposed to do with that? She was torn. She knew she loved him and didn’t want to jettison him, but committing her life to him at her young age seemed crazy. She was double minded, and she couldn’t commit to anything either way. It was a difficult place to be. It took a total work of God to get her to quit surfing the double minded wave and go all in.

When we are double minded we end up half in and half out. We can’t be free and exuberantly give it our all. When we doubt we will question whether we can trust God and will fall back to our old ways of protecting ourselves and doing things our way, not God’s way. Doubting is just an unpleasant way to live. It feels bad. You are double minded. You’re torn, you are actually being owned by fear. There is no peace and no joy in it, and it is impossible to live with passion and enthusiasm.

DOUBT HAS AN ANTIDOTE

As I studied these passages about Jesus’ resurrection, I couldn’t help but notice that God’s plan seems to open a door to doubt. In fact, I believe that God’s plan includes us dealing with doubt. Why did Jesus only show himself to his disciples in a locked room where no one else could see him? We know from other passages of Scripture that Jesus did appear to more than that group. However, it leaves us wondering why Jesus didn’t do the obvious? Why wasn’t he more public about his resurrection?

If I were the ruler of all things, I would have had Jesus openly walking through the streets of Jerusalem where everyone could see him. I would have had him go to the temple and teach there, giving undeniable proof to the entire nation, even the whole world, that he was risen from the grave and was very much alive. That would have established beyond doubt who he was, God in human form. By going only to his followers mostly in secret settings, Jesus opened a door to doubt. We have some evidence that Jesus rose from the grave. It is the testimony of people who claim to have seen him. But what we don’t have is incontrovertible proof that Jesus rose from the grave and openly showed himself.

God seems to have intended to leave a gap, one that makes doubt a possibility. There are a number of ways God could have eliminated doubt. He could have had the risen Jesus stay here on earth. Imagine that Jesus stayed on earth and kept performing miracles, and then kept doing that for the next 2000 years. I think it would be a lot easier for people to believe in him if Jesus were still alive, still looked the same as he did 2000 years ago. You could go see him and see the scars on his body. You could see him do some of those astounding miracles. Don’t you think it would be a lot easier to believe in him if he did that?

Why didn’t God do it that way? Or at least Jesus could make repeated visits to this world and do mind exploding things to force us to come to the conclusion that he is real. All of us would like to be even more certain about that thing where Jesus said we will live even if we die because he is the resurrection. God could remove any shred of doubt about that by periodically sending some people who have died back to this world to have them say, “Hey, where I’ve been is awesome. You are going to be astounded at how wonderful it is. I have to stay here for a few weeks to tell people about it, but as much as I like seeing you, I can’t wait to get back. I’ll look forward to see you when you get there.” What God has done appears to leave the door open to doubt. Why?

Hebrews 11:6 says, “Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” God says the key to pleasing him is faith. It is believing him when we don’t have irrefutable proof. In 2 Corinthians 5:7 Paul said, “We live by faith, not by sight.” Faith is what brings us the life of God, not knowing because we see.

Some people talk about taking the leap of faith. They depict faith as a blind leap. We have to leap off into the dark and then just hope for the best. Biblical faith is not a blind leap. It is not blind, but has eyes open. It uses a brain and asks whether this is true or not. Faith isn’t really even a leap. It is a step. It does involve stepping out without knowing for certain, but it is a step based on evidence.

God has left a gap between having reason to believe and having absolute, undeniable certainty. He wants us to close that gap with faith. No matter what you do, you are going to have to exercise faith. God has given us evidence that he is there. He has given evidence that he has revealed himself in Jesus of Nazareth through the testimony of many first century followers of Jesus. That evidence is powerful, but it is not absolutely incontrovertible. So now everyone has to make a choice. Whichever choice they make, they will have to do it with faith. One must either decide that the evidence is strong enough and choose to put faith in Jesus, or one must decide that the evidence is not strong enough and put faith in the claim it is not true. Neither side has evidence so overpowering that it cannot be ignored and denied. Therefore, one must choose by faith.

So God wants us to live by faith. This raises the question, why? Why is faith so important? My final answer to that is, “I don’t know, I’m not God. Some day you should ask him.” Ultimately, as I have said many times, when we ask any question that starts, “Why does God,” we are not going to know the answer unless he reveals it. If you ask, “Why did God send his Son into the world,” we know the answer because he told us. God so loved the world that he gave us his Son. But if he doesn’t tell us the why, we won’t know for certain. So why faith is so important is something of a divine mystery. But we do have some clues to why it is so important.

We think if we could just see, if we just had concrete proof, we would trust and obey God. We would seek to be what God wants us to be. But that’s not totally true. Adam and Eve did not have to exercise faith to believe in God. They had a face to face relationship with him. They could see him and talk with him. Believing that he existed required no more faith than is required for me to believe that Laurie exists. Did that mean, then, that they sought to please God and to be what he wanted them to be? No, it didn’t. They did precisely what he told them not to do. They had a million things that God said they could do, but they chose to do the only thing he told them not to do. That was a failure of faith. They did not believe that God was truly good, despite massive evidence that he was. When Satan said, “He doesn’t really want your good. He’s keeping something good from you,” they bought it. That was a failure of faith.

The issue of whether we will worship, serve and obey God, always comes down to faith. Faith is always the crucial element, and that’s why God has made it all about faith. That’s why God leaves that little gap, a gap that we fill by faith. The antidote to doubt is faith. It is examining the evidence, seeing that the preponderance lies on the side of God, and then putting our faith in him. Abraham is our example. God promised him and his wife Sarah that they would have a son. But years passed, and no son showed up. Talk about the biological clock ticking, when Sarah blew by 40 years old and then 50 years old, she and Abraham were confronted with a gap. There was reason to believe God, but the evidence on the side of not believing him was starting to seriously pile up. There was a lot of reason to doubt. The situation got worse when Sarah became a senior citizen. Great, all the other women her age were grandmothers, and she was supposed to believe she was going to have a son? Who could believe that? Then she got to the age where all her contemporaries were becoming great grandmothers, and she was still waiting for this promised son. They didn’t do it perfectly. They made some mistakes, the consequences of which are still with us. But they chose faith instead of doubt, and God counted that to them as righteousness. In other words, he said, “You guys get an A.” And in the end they also got a son.

THERE ARE THINGS THAT CAN HELP US NOT GIVE IN TO DOUBT

**Face Those Doubts**

We should be very clear that pretending doubt doesn’t exist, just trying to suppress questions and doubt, is a disaster waiting to happen. Doubt is like a weed. If you just ignore it, it’s like ignoring the weeds in your yard. I mentioned recently that after all the rain we got we had a weed forest last year that we had some help getting rid of. Then this year we had another rainy year. The weeds popped up again. We didn’t do anything about them. What I learned again is that the weeds don’t just go away. They grow and proliferate and if you don’t deal with them, they take over. So it is with doubt. It is going to grow. I’ve heard many times that people have said they were in a church where doubts were denied, were not allowed to be discussed. Most of the time the weeds take over. The doubt chokes out faith. The only way to deal with doubt is to be honest with it, to face it.

One thing that helps me is to remember that most of the decisions we make in life require faith. There are not many times when we make decisions and there is no doubt. When Laurie agreed to marry me, she did so on faith. There was considerable reason to doubt. She didn’t know for a fact that marrying me would work out well. Many people thought she’d lost her mind. What are you thinking getting married at your age, and what are you thinking getting married to that dude? The statistics were not on her side. The numbers for people getting married as teenagers in our culture are not good. So you bet there was reason for doubt. But she had faith. Faith filled the gap, and that turned out to be the best decision ever.

When you took a job, when you moved to a new location, when you bought a house, when you bought a car, when you got married, when you chose to have children, there were no absolute guarantees. There was reason for doubt in every one of those situations, and you had to exercise faith. When you drive in your car, when you get on an airplane, you do so by faith. You cannot get through this world without living by faith. So choosing to trust God by faith is not irrational. It is one more decision we make in a long line of decisions made by faith.

Please note that Jesus didn’t condemn Thomas because he doubted. Remember how often Jesus said to the disciples, “You have little faith.” But he didn’t say, “That’s it, you flunked. You’re out of the program.” He knew they would struggle with faith. He knew Thomas would doubt, and he chose him anyway. He loved him anyway. He knows we struggle to believe, and he loves us anyway.

**Trust The Truth**

Many years ago Bill Bright, the founder of the ministry now called Cru, came up with a little illustration that still helps me. He pictured our lives as being a little train. The engine he labeled “facts,” the coal car, which supplied fuel for power, he labeled “faith,” and the caboose he labeled “feelings.” He said if you try to pull your train by the caboose, it’s not going anywhere. When Laurie and I were driving to the airport in Dallas at one point we were on a country highway in the middle of absolute nowhere when we came to a railroad crossing just as the lights were flashing and the gates were closing. I thought encountering railroad tracks in this out of the way place seemed a bit random, but figured the delay would be minor because how big of a train could there be out here? Then the train showed up and I thought, “Uh oh, this could be a problem.” The give away was there were 6 engines. Why 6? There could only be one reason. This train was going to be huge. And it was. It began to feel like we were going to have to spend the night because this train seemed eternal. What I noticed was though it had 6 engines it had no caboose whatsoever. And the train ran just fine without a caboose. The only way to make the train go is to have the engine pull it. Put faith in the facts, and the feelings will be pulled along.

Adam and Eve should have put their faith in the fact of God’s presence and his abundant goodness evident around them every day. Instead they put their faith in the sibilant whisperings of a snake, and we all suffer because of it. When Abraham and Sarah faced doubtful circumstances, when it seemed there was every reason to not believe God, they put their faith in the fact that God had always been truthful and faithful to his promises.

We need to remind ourselves of the facts. There are some things that to me are solid truths, facts to count on. I think of them as the Magnificent Seven.

1. God is real and created all that exists.
2. Jesus rose from the dead, proving he was God in human form.
3. God loves us beyond our ability to comprehend as proven by the cross.
4. God is good and his will for us is good, again proven by the cross.
5. God is in control and has a plan for us. We know this because we can see how he unfolded his plan in history.
6. God has given us eternal life in Christ, proven by the resurrection.
7. Life is found in Jesus Christ, for he is the source of all life.

When I have questions I need to remind myself of these truths. There are a lot of things I don’t know. I am certain of fewer things now than I was when I was in my 20’s. But about these I am certain, and I need to put my faith in them.

**Remember And Give Thanks**

We tend to be very much “what have you done for me lately” people. One reinforcer of my pessimism has been the San Diego Padres. I have followed them for 40 years. It has been a steady diet of discouragement. I remember my totally surprised joy when they did the unthinkable and the extremely un-Padre like thing of signing Manny Machado to a huge contract. Up to then the Padres *never* did things like that. Then like a lightning bolt they committed $300 million to one of the best players in baseball. Manny was pretty good, and then in 2022 he practically put that team on his back and carried them to the postseason, and to two huge upsets over the Mets and the Dodgers, so they came within two games of going to the World Series. Then last year, when the Padres fell apart. Manny had a down year. This year they need him to be at his best, but he has not been great. At the beginning of this past week he was hitting a woeful .196. If you’re not familiar with baseball numbers, just know that is pathetic. It is easy to get down on him. What have you done for me lately, Manny? We could get critical of him and say he is a disastrous waste of money. But we need to remember. We need to remember what he has done for this team. We need to remember who he is. We need to remember what he can do if healthy, and be thankful for him.

We tend to do the what have you done for me lately thing with God. We need to remember. Remember who he is and what he has done. It is in remembering and giving thanks that our faith is bolstered. Deuteronomy 4:9 says, “Only be careful and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them fade from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them.”

Moses told Israel they needed to remember how God had worked miraculously to save them, sustain them, lead them and establish a relationship with them. We need to remember that Jesus came to save us, that he died for us and defeated death for us. We need to remember how God has worked in our lives in the past. We need to always remind ourselves of these things and thank Him.

Psalm 103:2 tells us to praise God and not forget all his benefits. Psalm 105:5 tells us to remember the wonders he has done. Rather than say, “What have you done for me lately, we need to say to God, “Thank you for what I know you have done. Thank you that I know that you will be faithful and go