

Finding Balance

April 19, 2020

John 20:19-31

As humans, one goal most of us have for our lives is balance. For example, not only do we want a successful work life, but we probably want a happy social life and home life, too. Therefore, there is a balance that needs to be found so that all of one's relational, vocational, and social needs are met. We see balance playing a role in other areas of our lives as well. Outside of many courts, there is the stereotypical statue of a blindfolded woman holding a scale that is balanced out. One of the most popular spur-of-the-moment tattoos people get is the yin-yang symbol, the very symbol of balance. If something happens, the current pandemic being a great example, we talk about how our life has been "thrown out of balance." For us as humans, balance is a quintessential part of life. Without it, life feels all that much harder to live. When our life is "out of balance," one of the first things we as Christians ask ourselves is "Where is God in all of this?" We begin to have doubts that God is there or God cares, even if just for a moment, and we see the scars of our past, wondering "Where was God when I needed him most?" As it turns out, we are not alone in this experience, because much of what we deal with in those moments where our lives feel "unbalanced," we can relate to Thomas in today's reading, a reading that has two major themes to it.

The first of the major themes this reading addresses is the place for "doubt" amidst faith. We hear this story, and many people have argued that Thomas, in the midst of his doubt, was faithless. He was a poor disciple. How dare he not have faith that his Lord, his Savior, his teacher was up walking around? In the modern day, we even have the phrase "Don't be such a Doubting Thomas" as a reprimand of sorts for the nay-sayers among us. However, this phrase is used as if only a select few ever have doubt, as if doubt is this terrible thing, but this is not the case. Everyone has doubted something at least once in their life. We doubt that a certain political candidate will get (re)elected. We doubt a given sports team will win the championship game. We doubt that the coming summer/winter can be worse than the last one we had, because nothing was as bad as that. We doubt these things because we have evidence enough to prevent us from believing otherwise. The political candidate has been caught dealing in fraudulent schemes and cons, and because of their being found guilty of those things, the voters will see them for who they really are. The sports team in question has lost the last certain number of games, and given the way they are playing, their chances of winning every game from now to the end of the regular season isn't a shadow of a chance. The last summer/winter was the worst on record, and those temperatures were so off-the-wall hot/cold, we cannot fathom that they can get any higher/lower or that the rain-/snowfall could have a higher volume. This method of thinking was the case with Thomas.

Bear in mind, a little over two weeks prior to seeing Jesus in the flesh, he sees his teacher, the one he has sworn to follow to the ends of the earth without question, arrested, beaten, tortured, crucified, killed, and posthumously stabbed. No other recorded human has, prior to Jesus or after Jesus, survived such a violent encounter. Now he's being told that the one he saw so maliciously attacked is walking around. Plus, Jesus only appears when he's not there? Of course he's going to have doubts! The facts simply don't add up to being a plausible occurrence. Then, Jesus does appear to Thomas and invites Thomas to stick his fingers through

the holes in his hands and his hand in Jesus' side. In a manner of speaking, Jesus is not reprimanding Thomas for his doubt. Rather, Jesus is meeting Thomas in his doubt and invites him to believe, and as a result, Thomas makes the most powerful confession of *any* of the disciples in the Gospels: "My Lord and My God!" Yes, Jesus does give praise to those who believe *without* seeing, but this is not a condemnation of those who doubt. Rather, this is an invitation to walk alongside those who do have doubt, to help them answer their questions as best we can and to help them find a sense of clarity whereby they *can* believe. I will readily admit that I have had doubts about God, but because of those doubts, I was motivated to find answers, to find clarity, and as a result, those doubts led to a strengthened faith, to stronger confessions of faith. This is exactly what happens with Thomas: his doubt leads him to find clarity, and as a result, he makes the strongest personal confession of any of the disciples. Therefore, doubt is a step towards faith, a step towards finding balance in one's spiritual life. The story doesn't stop here, though.

The second major theme of this reading is that of "scars." Bear in mind when this story is taking place. After the Resurrection, there is this assumption that all will be well with the disciples. Everyone will see "the disciples were right" and there no longer needs to be this fear among them. Everyone can live in harmony, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ can be spread to all the ends of the Earth. However, that's not the case. In both parts of the story, with and without Thomas, the disciples are in an upper room behind *locked* doors out of fear of the Jews. In both cases, Jesus presents his scars to them, first to the ten (Thomas and Judas weren't present) and then to Thomas. As much as it sounds like the stereotypical guy thing to show off his scars to his buddies, Jesus is making a very profound statement in both showing and allowing them to touch his scars: like it or not, scars are a part of life and a part of our faith journeys.

As much as we would wish that, with the Resurrection, the Easter crowds will remain the rest of the year and that all our pain and suffering come to an end, this is not the case. We hear about Jesus' resurrection, and we like to think that this means that all the bad stuff is now gone. Our scars, bad memories, every bad thing, they are erased from history. Those things that we were once afraid of, we don't have to fear them anymore. However, this is not the case. Consider for a moment a lit candle in an otherwise dark room. We cannot distinguish that candle as "bright" without there being a darkness to which to compare it. In the same fashion, the glory of God's grace cannot be understood without the hardships bore in life. In the story, the scars of Jesus represent the injustice and harshness of humanity, but the fact that Jesus yet lives, that he has risen from the dead, is a sign of God's power and authority. God has displayed power greater than any hardship or evil humanity can inflict upon itself, but such power cannot be understood without that hardship. As Amy Pauw writes, "John 20:19-31 is a guide for being an Easter community where the wounds of crucifixion are not denied, where the continued reality of death and failure and trauma is not covered up, where our lament finds a communal home alongside our joy. Resurrection faith means having the courage to look at our wounds."

Therefore, with this story comes a two-fold invitation for us. The first invitation is to not feel ashamed of one's doubt or the doubt of another. Having doubt is a step towards greater faith if only one is given time to answer one's questions, therein strengthening one's faith. The other invitation is to consider one's own scars. Every person faces hardships, regardless of demographics. God's greatness is better understood and faith in God is better developed through

acknowledging one's scars, and therein acknowledging God's power to overcome such difficulties and God's love shown through his presence with us during those darker times. Faith cannot exist without doubt, just as light cannot exist without darkness. The scars we bear that remind us of times we have been hurt, where we have felt off-balance and doubted God's love for us, they remind us also of times where God has brought us through, has seen us safely through the valleys. We seek to find balance, but we cannot have the good without the bad. Success comes in tandem with failure. Strong faith comes through having doubt. Feeling the Love of God happens most when we are feeling unable to be loved. The Resurrection and salvation could not happen without the torture and Crucifixion. I invite you all, therefore, to find balance during this time, to find answers to your doubts, and hopefully to see God's presence in all of this.