

What It Costs To Believe

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“Blessed are those who have not seen yet have come to believe.”

The Gospel of John is full of issues of believability. Again and again this issue of belief and disbelief comes up. In fact, Jesus spends most of that Gospel trying to show folks who he is. He turns water into wine, feeds thousands, restores sight and mobility; he even walks on water. Some might say he was trying to prove himself.

Now I imagine Jesus was probably a pretty humble guy. But I can kind of imagine him going “OK, guys, do you believe me now? H-e-l-l-o-o-o; son of God. Get it? Look what I just did. No? Nothing? Really?” Alright. I mean, Jesus performed seven different miracles and still people doubted him, still people didn’t quite get it. And I wonder why. Was it just too big for them? Too far beyond their comprehension? Too scary? Too life-altering? Maybe. In our world we like to have proof. We rely heavily on reason, on our brains instead of our hearts. As if our whole system isn’t connected; as if it has to be one or the other.

Several years ago I decided I wanted to volunteer at a local rape crisis center. After 80 hours of training I was certified to work the hotline. But as my first shift approached, I got nervous, really nervous. Would I say the right thing? What if I made it worse somehow? Would I be able to handle the terrible things I would hear? During that first shift I got several calls. And my heart ached. And I was inspired. And something else happened that I didn’t quite expect: I doubted. Some of the stories I heard just sounded too awful to be true. Now, I’m not naïve. I am acutely aware of the prevalence of domestic and sexual violence in our world. I had no illusions. But some of these stories just didn’t quite add up, and I found myself listening for hints of dishonesty instead of the reality of the lives of these callers. So after a few shifts I checked in with my supervisor.

We sat down and sheepishly I said, “How do you know if all the people who call are telling the truth?” And my supervisor looked at me and said, “What does that matter?” She said, “That’s not your job here. It is not your job to play detective or discern whether or not someone is lying. Your job is to listen, support, and to respond with what is needed. That’s it. And besides,” she said, “what would it cost you if you believed them?” What would it cost me to believe them? I sat with that for a really long time.

I realized that I had been operating out of a place of scarcity. As if I only had a certain amount of empathy and I couldn’t afford to waste it on anyone who didn’t truly need it. So I tried to discern who deserved it and who didn’t. On my next shift I decided I would chose to believe every person I spoke to, and it changed me. It made me a better counselor and community

member. I listened more deeply, offered more nuanced responses, and I learned so much. And I realized what a gift that is, to believe someone unconditionally. It made me think of how often I needed that in my own life. That's not to say that folks didn't embellish sometimes, but even then it wasn't to lie. It was to get the response, the outrage, that they deserved and had been denied. We are quick to doubt and slow to believe. And I wonder what it costs us?

News of executive orders and pipelines and walls and bombings and the continued killings of people of color, continues to amass. Immigrants, Muslims, Black folks, Arabs, and others are being targeted for violence in our country. They are assaulted, arrested, deported, and then blamed. And it seems to me that the most common response to these realities is *doubt*: Did they have a weapon? Did they have prior run-ins with law enforcement? Did they use drugs or alcohol? Did they resist? These are all questions we use to veil our doubt, when perhaps what we are really asking is *do they deserve it?*

For centuries we've been shown the horrors of racism. We have seen movements for civil rights, farm workers, sanctuary, and Black Lives. Yet still so many question whether or not racism exists. People still say we live in a post-racial society.

It's been said before, but Jesus was also a man of color – an Arab, killed by the state. He also had previous run-ins with law enforcement. He also enjoyed his wine. And he also resisted a culture aimed at killing him. And he too was disbelieved. And then there was Thomas. Now, Thomas considered himself a good disciple. He followed Jesus and encouraged the others to risk for the Gospel. But there he was....doubting. "So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord!' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.'" What wounds do we ask to poke into in order to believe? What does our doubt cost us?

Jesus offered Thomas his wounds. He said, "Put your finger here in my hand. Reach out and put it into my side." Some read this and hear a generous Jesus. But I'm just not sure. I wonder if Jesus wasn't angry. See, while he was alive he said over and over again, "I did this so that you might see and believe." But that changed; it changed after the crucifixion. That changed after the resurrection. And I wonder if Jesus didn't come to Thomas exasperated that even in death, even after appearing to the apostles, Thomas still doubted him. I wonder if he came to Thomas and said "Fine, fine! Put your finger here in my hand!! Put your hand in my side!" Because afterwards he said "Blessed are those who have not yet seen, but believe." Maybe Jesus was done showing, done explaining, done trying to prove himself.

In the past it might have been sufficient for us to have to see to believe, but we are past that point now. We have seen the wounds, heard the policies. They loop over and over again. We watch people crucified on our screens. And then a few days later, sometimes only a few hours, we are watching people rise up. But still we doubt. And I wonder: is it just too big for us? Too far beyond our comprehension? Too scary? Too life-altering?

Jesus offered his wounds to Thomas, but it doesn't say anywhere that Thomas pushed into them. And I can't imagine he would. In fact all he could say was, "Oh my Lord. Oh my God." I feel that way sometimes. In my shock and overwhelm, in my grief, I look around and all I can think is *Oh my Lord. Oh, my, God.* And all I know in that moment is that I don't want to push into that wound anymore.

What does our doubt cost us? It costs us the kin-dom of God. Our doubt wounds the kin-dom of God because it wounds the people of God. So what if we were...believers? What if from this point forward, when someone named the ways racism impacts them, impacts our country, big or small, we just believed them? What if we did not need proof of someone's suffering before we offered our empathy? What if we allowed ourselves to be changed? What if we understood that our job is to listen, support, and respond with what is needed? What if we heard Jesus when he said, "Stop doubting and believe." What would it cost us? What does it cost us if we don't?

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