

From Doubt to Grace+

Most of you know a little about me; the Apostle John mentions me four times, but only one of those scenarios has found its way to stick in people's brains. My name is Thomas; I was one of Jesus's twelve disciples. While mentioned in the passage read earlier, I am most remembered for what I said after ten of my colleagues witnessed the resurrected Christ on what is called Easter night. From a distance, I had watched him die; for three years, I had traveled the countryside with Jesus and the other disciples, but now he was gone. I wanted to close that chapter of my life; the other ten needed to be together, but I was wrought with shame and guilt. I couldn't bear to face the ones who had joined me on the three-year odyssey of incredible community and connectedness. Jesus had offered so much good; his healings and miracles were spectacular. His teachings and personal lessons were life-changing. We thought that he was for real! So much so, that when he asked us to follow him, those words enticed us with an understanding that the world would be a better place and our own lives would finally be fulfilled. And he fulfilled his end of the bargain.

So when Jesus was crucified, after I saw how he was treated, I simply could not be around the others. The memory was too painful; the loss was too great. They may have needed the support of each other; I simply needed to nurse my pain and be alone. When they came to me indicating that they had seen the Lord, I didn't believe them; after all, with teary eyes, I had watched him die. I had seen the public humiliation, and I too was ashamed and embarrassed by my behavior. I told 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." I am now called Doubting Thomas, because I did not believe them. I not only wanted to see the holes in his hands, I would not believe unless I could *touch* the nail-scarred hands. I saw the soldier thrust a sword in his side, even after Jesus was already dead. My own heart ached, as if a sword of reality had been thrust into my soul. I was haunted by my own declaration just a few days earlier.

After Jesus had a life-threatening altercation with the Jewish authorities in the Temple, we had retreated to an area near the Jordan River. Back at Solomon's Portico in the Temple, Jesus had declared, "The Father and I are one," which prompted those listeners, or should I say *debaters*, to pick up rocks. They wanted to stone Jesus, because they accused him of blasphemy. The scenario reflected a mobscene, because Jesus was threatening their understanding of God and their way of life. Thankfully, we got out of there alive, but it was quite a scary time.

While Jesus invested in his twelve disciples, he made many other friends. One family in particular captured his affection. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived in a small town called Bethany, which was located two miles outside of the walls of Jerusalem. They opened their home to Jesus, whom as you know did not have a home himself. While we were recharging our batteries near the Jordan, someone found us and shared a message with Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." In those days, illness frequently led to death, because we had little knowledge of medicines. Even the wording of the message indicated the depth of relationship which Jesus shared with that family. "He whom you love is ill."

At times when Jesus spoke, we frankly didn't understand. Upon hearing of his good friend's illness, Jesus simply said, "This illness is not fatal; it will become an occasion to show God's glory by glorifying God's Son." His comment came as a relief, because many of us wondered back at the Temple, "If we can get out of here alive, we will never come back."

For a couple of days, we enjoyed each other and privately wondered how Lazarus was feeling. Imagine our surprise when Jesus declared, "Time to pack up our stuff and head back to Judea." The Temple, the nerve-center of Judaism, was located in Jerusalem of Judea.

Some of the more extroverted disciples could not contain their trepidation, "Jesus, are you kidding? Just a few days ago, inside a building intended to glorify God, the religious people were mad enough to stone you. Don't you think if you show your face so soon that they might be incensed enough to kill you on sight?"

Always the Teacher, Jesus responded with a lesson which made perfect sense to me. He said, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of the world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them."

Twelve hours of daylight gave a worker enough time to accomplish the tasks at hand. While that is a lengthy span of time, it still is *only* twelve hours. How many times do we come to the end of our days and wish that we had spent less time doing something with little importance and more time attempting something with lasting importance? Time cannot be extended.

But because we had been with Jesus for three years, we also heard more than just a *surface* meaning. When he used the phrase "the light of the world," we remembered that he used that phrase when referencing himself. We would not stumble as long as we were with him and he with us. Jesus had a limited time on earth; repeatedly, he had told us that he would not live forever. His friend was sick; Jesus's time was limited, and perhaps Lazarus's time was also limited. His friend needed him.

Jesus then told us, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." This was another one of those scenarios when we simply did not understand what Jesus meant. Why would we have to go to Bethany to wake up Lazarus from his sleep? He had two sisters who truly were capable of rousing him from slumber.

Then Jesus told us plainly, "Lazarus is dead." We couldn't believe our ears. If Jesus knew that he was that sick, why hadn't he left immediately when he had gotten the news? It was as if he was reading our minds. He said, "For your sake I am glad I was not there; you're about to be given a new opportunity to believe. Now, let's go to him."

Again, Jesus was thinking of us. Everything he did came through a filter of revealing God. The primary intention of his healings, miracles, and teachings were to manifest God. Realizing that Jesus wanted to go see his good friend Lazarus, even though he was dead and knowing that Jesus had a reason behind his request, I weighed the costs. Jesus had a limited window of time; he had not failed us yet.

On another occasion, Jesus had also said, "The person who seeks to gain his life will lose it; the person who loses his life will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in exchange for their life?" Based upon my own understanding, I then declared to my fellow disciples, "Let's all go, that we may die with him." While it may not have been the *popular* thing to say or do, my declaration was the *right* thing to say and do.

So we left and went to Bethany. The trip took us two days and was difficult, not because of the rugged terrain, but instead because we knew what was ahead of us. With boldness and courage, Jesus led us all the way. After conversations with both Martha and Mary, we learned that Lazarus had been dead for four days. The mourners remained in full force. Everyone had expected Jesus to have arrived long before now. Given his depth of relationship with that family, Jesus was also moved to tears. While those who had been in Bethany mourned the loss of Lazarus, our trip to Bethany had been a living wake. We were keenly aware that Jesus was not popular among the powerful of that area; we grieved over what might happen in *our* futures. Lazarus was dead; others wanted to kill Jesus, and then we would be next. We wondered if our fears were justified.

Jesus stood in front of the tomb where a large circular stone wheel had been rolled in front of the opening. He requested that the stone be removed; Martha reminded Jesus that her brother had been dead for four days. The stone was rolled away, and Jesus turned his attention to heaven thanking God

for hearing his prayers. All the way from the Jordan, Jesus had been praying for guidance and that God would raise Lazarus from the dead.

I had witnessed miracle after miracle offered by Jesus, but none compared with what I witnessed that day. With my two ears, I heard Jesus shout, "Lazarus, come out!" and then with my two eyes, I saw the unthinkable: out of the tomb walked a man wrapped as a mummy; Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead!

Lazarus was given his life back, but it came with a price. As a result of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, the Pharisees and Chief Priests called a meeting. They discussed the ramifications of what might happen if Jesus were not stopped. They concluded that the Romans would come and destroy not only the Temple but their nation, and they would not allow that to happen. Instead, they began to plot and plan a way to trap him, arrest him, and have him executed.

And they were successful. They sought to trap Jesus, but he eluded them until he was betrayed by one of my colleagues. By the Jordan River, I had convinced the other disciples that we needed to go with Jesus and die with him. After we left the Upper Room on the night before he was crucified, Jesus predicted that all of us would leave him. Simon Peter declared that while everybody else might desert Jesus, he would never leave but would follow all the way to the end.

The plot unfolded just as Jesus predicted; everyone left him, except for some women. We could have stepped forward; we could have said something; we could have tried to stop the process. Instead, we did nothing, paralyzed by our own fear.

So when I heard that Jesus was indeed alive and that he had appeared to the others, I did not believe it. I didn't want to face him, because even though he did what he said he was going to do, I had not followed through on my promise. I had not died with him.

One week after Easter, I rejoined the other ten disciples and out of thin air, Jesus appeared in the room, which scared me out of my wits. He said, "Peace be with you." And then he looked directly at me and said, "Thomas, put your finger here; see my hands? Reach out your hand and touch my side. No need to doubt anymore. All I want from you is for you to believe."

We are to believe even when we think we are not good enough; even when we make promises we have not kept; even when we have disappointed those who are closest to us. For those who wrestle with guilt and shame over past mistakes; for those who remain stuck thinking that Jesus could never forgive you; for those who find yourselves paralyzed by fear, take heart. Jesus is far more interested in our futures than in our pasts. Jesus stands ready to extend grace no matter how often we have failed him; no matter how grievous our sin; no matter what. All Jesus asks of us is to believe.