

The Story Ends in Doubt

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

Here we are, the week after Easter, and I am still talking to you through my computer screen. [chuckles] But, I sure do miss you. I am really eager for the day when we can be together in person. Meanwhile, this is what we will do. We will be here every week, and multiple times throughout the week, and during this time, just keep doing the right things. I want you to stay home, I want you to be safe, I want you to wear your masks when you do go out, and I want to take care of each other, and as much as you can, take care of those in our community who are in need. And I'll tell you a little bit more about some of the ways we're gathering and the ways that you can help those in our community at the end of the service today. And we're going to continue to make every effort to stay connected to each other, in all these digital ways, that we can.

One thing I do want to remind you about is that we have been taking communion every Sunday in our Zoom meetings. As with so many other things, it's not quite as nice as it might be to do it together, but we do the best we can, and so at some point during the sermon, when it gets particularly boring, you might want to step away to go get your own communion elements of bread and wine, or the closest thing that you have on hand. I've noticed some of you have posted to Instagram and social media pictures of your communion elements, and I get a big kick out of that, as well as a lot of joy, so—I don't know—hashtag Zoom communion or something, I don't know.

So, it is the Sunday after Easter, and as Pastor Jesse mentioned in the children's moment, Easter is like Christmas in that the church observes the *season* of Easter after Easter Sunday, and so we are in a season right now called Eastertide, and we're gonna be doing a series just called "Eastertide." And as I was trying to decide what to do during this particular season, I got thinking that we could probably all benefit from some simplicity and a sense of routine and predictability. I know, for me, managing to have just a little bit of predictability and routine in my life and in my days is a huge part of how I am coping with this experience in this tough season. So, I decided that for my sermons and for our liturgy and the worship services we

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would go back to the lectionary again. And what that means is that the biblical texts that we look at each week are already set out in advance for us. I don't have to think about what I'm going to preach on, I just have to choose one or more of those Bible passages; I don't have to choose—our liturgy team doesn't have to choose—what texts to use in the service, because we just use the ones that are already there in the lectionary.

And the added great bonus to that is that *you* can go look those up online and *you* can use the lectionary texts to guide your own Bible study, your own reading that you might be able to do during this time, and you'll know when you do that that those passages that you read are also going to shape our experience of worship when we're coming together on the next Sunday. Now, I'm sure that someone is already pasting the link to the lectionary schedule in the comments, so you can open that in your browser and bookmark it or save it for later; you can also always just do a Google search for the word “lectionary” and it comes right up.

So, today's sermon is based on the Gospel reading from the lectionary which you just heard read a minute ago: John, chapter 20, verses 19 through 31. And I have titled the sermon: “The Story Ends in Doubt,” and that's because the story that you just heard—the famous one that, even if you don't know anything about the Bible you, probably have got some sense of what happens in that story, the one where Thomas refuses to believe in the resurrection of Jesus until he can actually touch the holes in Jesus's hands and in his side—that story, that's the *very last event* that is recorded in John's Gospel. The book is over at that point, and actually, really interestingly, John's Gospel is the latest Gospel; it was the last one to be written of the 4 Gospels in the Bible, by a long shot, and so not only is this the last story in John's Gospel, this story about Thomas doubting is the last story in *the Gospels*, it's the last one in the whole Bible. (Of the stories about Jesus, anyway.)

And so, it got me thinking about famous last scenes from movies and books and that kind of thing. I wonder, do you have a favorite last scene? Something that just stuck with you, that made the movie or the book or whatever kind of art you were taking in, just made it really stick? I mean, I think of, like, *The Usual Suspects*, right? So, um—I don't have to give a spoiler alert on a movie that was released in 1995, right? If you don't know the ending of *The Usual Suspects*, just cover your ears for a second. Kevin Spacey walks away and the limp kind of goes away that he's had, and you learn that it was all a ploy and that he was Kaiser Sose all along. You might think, slightly more classically, of the movie *The Planet of the Apes*, where at the end, in the last scene, the camera pulls back to reveal the Statue of Liberty buried in the sand on the beach, and you learn that this strange planet ruled by apes is not some alien planet, it's actually Earth kind of like in a different timeline or something. Or (I'm not like a big classic movie buff, so I had to look this one up, but) like the ending of *Casablanca* has a famous last line, as

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Humphrey Bogart walks off into the fog on the runway saying, “Louie, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.” And who could forget the final words of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*: “And so, as Tiny Tim observed, ‘God bless us, everyone.’”

So, endings are really important for any storyteller, whether that's a screenwriter for a movie or a TV show, or a novel, or an opera—the ending of the story is the last thing that the storyteller gets to tell us, or show us. And so, for those of us who are trying to figure out the meaning of a work of literature or film, those decisions that we look at, that the that the writer or the creator made about how to end this piece of work, that's a clue to figuring out what the storyteller had in mind, and it's also true when we're trying to study and understand the Bible. And so, I wonder why John would have chosen this particular story as the final one to put in his Gospel.

Sometimes I like to imagine myself as a Gospel writer, so if I were writing “the Gospel according to Scott,” what would I have chosen to include in *my* telling of the story, if I had been, you know, with Jesus all along and seen all these things? I wonder, what would I carefully omit from the story, so as to make Jesus look quite as good as possible? What parts might I emphasize? How would I begin the story? How would I end it? I mean, I think I might start and end my Gospel with the big miracles. I mean, virgin birth at the beginning, resurrection at the end. Don't get cute with it; just tell the big parts of it, and whatever you want to put in the middle, that's fine, but I think I would end it that way. I'm pretty sure that I would not have ended it with *this* story.

But that's one of the things that I love about the Bible, that it does continually surprise us. I've read the story I-don't-know-how-many dozens of times in my life, and it never occurred to me until this week—that's the very last thing that happens in John's Gospel. *Why?* It seems like it highlights someone who is so unimpressive; it puts somebody on display who is so uncertain. I mean, Thomas is not exactly the poster child for a global religious movement that's about to get underway. You know, and by the time John has written his Gospel, that movement is already somewhat underway.

Well, I think that John's choice to end his Gospel with this moment of doubt—it does make sense, but it only begins to make sense when you look at what John adds on as commentary, right? So, right after this story he adds one more—two more sentences to the end of the Gospel, and this is what he says: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book, but these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing, you may have life in his name.”

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So John is talking about *signs*, and you may remember from a long time ago that at Artisan we were going through the book of John, one story at a time, and we did this on and off for years. I once joked that we would probably finish about the time that my older son graduated from high school. (He's finishing up his sophomore year and we still haven't finished, so I'm not sure if we're going to make that or not, but we'll see.) Anyway, that series from the Gospel of John was originally called "Signs of Faith," and the title for the series came from this last two sentences in the book. John says, basically, *I wrote down all of these miracles (signs) that Jesus did so that you might come to believe in him, and that believing in him would give you life.* And so, in some ways, the entire Gospel of John is leading up to that final sentence. But, I think that the last story, the one about Thomas needing proof in order to believe, I think that story *especially* leads up to that last sentence about the purpose of the whole Gospel of John. Let me tell you what I mean.

So John records these signs, these seven miracles in the book, so that his readers will come to place their faith in Jesus and find new life in him as a result (that's why he writes the book). But then at the end of the book, he connects all of those signs and that belief. Let's include ourselves in that — that's our belief that we're kind of getting in part from John's Gospel. He connects all of that to the words that Jesus says to Thomas when he finally appears to him. Remember what Jesus said to him: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." So I guess there are a lot of lessons you could take from this story, but here's the one that offers me some comfort, and maybe it will offer you some comfort as well. The lesson is that belief was never expected to be easy. Boy, we really beat ourselves up over our doubts.

There's a Nickel Creek song called "Doubting Thomas" that Anna's going to play after the sermon. I'm just realizing she was supposed to play it before the sermon and I jumped right in and totally skipped her. Sorry! We definitely want to hear you play that song. But even the title of the song, "Doubting Thomas" the name that Thomas gets is tied up with this one week of his life where he was doubting. And when you hear the song and see the words, and maybe sing along with them, you'll realize that the song is ultimately hopeful for people who struggle with belief but also captures how critical we can be of ourselves. Thomas gets a really bad rap. He gets this nickname, and maybe deservedly so. I mean, after all, he had been there with Jesus all along. He was one of the key followers. He'd seen all the miracles. You'd think he would believe. But maybe we should cut him a little bit of slack. I mean, he had seen Jesus die on the cross. Easy for us to say, "Well, just wait three days!" Right? I'm not sure it's reasonable for us to have expected Thomas to expect the resurrection of Jesus. And then, in spite of all of his closest friends getting to have this amazing encounter with the risen Jesus, Thomas did not get that experience. I think if it were me, I'd be like, "Why did Jesus pick the time when I wasn't in

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the room to suddenly appear to everybody?" I'm kind of grumpy. I probably would have just quit and walked out, but he didn't do that. Thomas didn't quit. This story that we're seeing him in today took place a whole week later, so he had a whole week of stewing with the fact that all of his friends had seen Jesus and he hadn't gotten to see them. And you say well, he refused to believe without physical proof. Faith is the belief in things that you can't see, and he said that he wouldn't believe Jesus was alive until he could actually put his fingers in the nail holes in Jesus's hands. But there again, if we step outside of ourselves and pretend that we've never heard this story before, that's a pretty specific demand that Thomas placed on his belief. Is that the thing that I would've come up with? Why did he ask for that particular thing?

I think the reason he asked for that particular thing is because that is what Jesus showed the other disciples. If you were to look at verse 19 when Jesus comes and appears to the disciples without Thomas, this is what it says: "Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord." So only then did they rejoice, when they saw his hands and his side, right? "Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'" So the disciples saw the hands and the pierced side of Jesus and then they rejoiced, and then they did what he told them to do. He sent them to tell others, and they did. And one of the people that they told, of course, was their friend, Thomas. And surely they included that detail about his hands and his side. I know I would have included that detail if it were me. Like, he was raised from the dead but he still had the holes in his hand. It was amazing. And so it's not just that Thomas is, like, this innately doubting person that just out of the blue said, "I'm not going to believe until I can put my fingers in the holes in Jesus' hands." He's basically saying, you all had this experience and then you believed. I want to have the same experience. Maybe that's not too much to ask.

Anyway, I think probably we should go a little easier on Thomas and his doubt. And I think we should go easy on each other and on ourselves when we see doubt around us, in our friends or family, or when we see doubt in our own heart and mind, and life. Let me close with one last thought, and then you get to hear that beautiful song that Anna's going to sing. I titled the sermon, "The Story Ends in Doubt," because that's how John concludes his story about Jesus, and I thought that was interesting. But I'd like to encourage you and myself to think about this another way. In fact, what I want to say is that the story *begins* in doubt. It's very tempting to think about doubt as an ending place. "Well, I'm doubting what I was taught. I guess I've lost my faith. The end." I know a lot of people have had that experience and had that response to the experience. But what if instead you thought about doubt not as the end of something, but as the beginning of something new. Think about Thomas. This may have been the last thing to happen in John's Gospel, but it was the first thing to happen in Thomas' life as a disciple of the

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resurrected Jesus. Now we don't actually know very much from the Bible about what happened to Thomas after this other than that he did stick around with the other disciples. He joined them in prayerful expectation of the Holy Spirit. We see him in the book of Acts in the story of the emerging of the early church. He's there with them. Other than that, we don't see much in the Bible. But church tradition has a lot of stories about Thomas, including that Saint Thomas went on to spread the Gospel in India and China, and possibly in Indonesia, and somehow maybe even in Paraguay. I'm not kidding, that is one of the stories from church tradition about Thomas. I have no idea how he got to a landlocked country in South America, but that's part of the legend anyway. At any rate, we don't know exactly how much of that is true. But what we do know is that Thomas had a new beginning, and it happened because of that extra encounter that he had through Jesus because of his doubt. And so for Thomas, that was not the end of his story even though it was the end of John's story about Jesus. For Thomas, doubt was the beginning of his story.

And so I've talked to enough of you to know that you have your own doubts. What about yours? Maybe you have even more doubt than usual lately. Maybe this experience that the world is undergoing right now has caused you to have doubts about your faith for the first time in your whole life. That can be very unsettling. And I want to encourage you; doubt is not the end. Maybe this is just a new beginning, a new chapter, or even a new type of story that God wants to write, or tell, or show along with you. And what's that story going to look like? That is up to you and God. And I'd love to hear what you think. Let me pray for us now.

Lord, we are grateful for this story about Thomas because sometimes the heroes of the Bible are setting the bar too high, and sometimes we need these anti-heroes. Help us to see in Thomas our own experience — that our doubt doesn't have to be the end of the story, but that maybe it's the beginning of something new that you are going to do with us and through us. And alongside you, we can participate in the telling of a new story in the world. I pray for each person hearing this or or viewing this, that they would have a sense of being in community with you and with each other even in this time of distance and separation. May we know your Spirit's presence to be among us. May we travel alongside the Lord Jesus in whatever ways we can. And it's in his name that we pray, Amen.

[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information, visit us at [ArtisanChurch.com](https://www.ArtisanChurch.com).