

“Where In the World Is Jesus?”
John 20:24-29; Psalm 16:5-11

“All but one man died.
There at Bitter Creek.
And they say he ran away.

Branded, scorned as the one who ran.
What do you do when you’re branded, and you know you’re a man?

Wherever you go, for the rest of your life
You must prove, you’re a man.”

If you are fifty, or older, you might be able to sing this refrain. I still can, but fortunately for you I decided to speak it instead of sing it. It came from the 1965 show “Branded.” Starring Chuck Connors, it chronicled the adventures of U.S. Calvary Captain Jason McCord, the only survivor of a battle who is wrongly accused of cowardice and court-martialed. As a viewer, you know that McCord is actually a hero, and so honorable that he refuses to relate the details of the battle because it would incriminate his commanding officer.

A six foot, five inches tall, Chuck Connors played both baseball for the Chicago Cubs and basketball for the Boston Celtics before turning to television. This series, along with one entitled “The Rifleman” made him so popular that when Soviet Premier Leonard Brezhnev was asked which famous Americans he would like to meet on his state visit, the only one he requested was Chuck Connors.

As a teenage boy, I, too, was impressed with the tall, muscular, foreboding character Connors played. But what I remember the most was the anguish of a man living with a shame and mocking moniker that he did not deserve.

“Doubting Thomas” Thankfully, the Apostle Thomas is no longer around to hear the mocking moniker that has been placed upon him. Like Chuck Connor’s Army captain, Thomas carries a title associated with one event, as if the rest of his life was a blank page. But, if asked most of us would recall this one episode of Thomas’s life.

It is seven days after Jesus’ resurrection. A week before Jesus had appeared to his disciples, but Thomas was not there. We are never told why. Yet, we do know the other disciples profess to Thomas, “We have seen the Lord.” But Thomas replies, “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.”

Once again the disciples are behind closed doors when Jesus appears. He goes straight to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” “My Lord and my God!”

Thomas replies. And Jesus says, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

An old Peanuts cartoon has Lucy standing in the outfield of Charlie Brown’s baseball diamond. As a fly ball sails toward her, she remembers all the other times she’s dropped the ball. You can guess what happens next: she drops this one, too. Then Lucy calls out to Charlie Brown, who is standing there on the pitcher’s mound: “I almost had it, but then my past got in my eyes!”

When Jesus returned to reveal himself to Thomas, Thomas did not allow his past to get in his eyes. Rather, he totally committed himself to the risen Christ.

“Doubting Thomas”

The disparagement glides off the tongue, and has done so for almost 2000 years. Yet, is it a true description of the apostle named Thomas? We actually know very little about Thomas, the brief glimpse we have coming mainly from John’s gospel. Besides this story, Thomas’s chief appearance occurs in chapter eleven when Jesus tells the disciples he is going to Bethany to see the dying Lazarus. And Thomas, realizing that travelling that close to Jerusalem will put Jesus at risk of capture by the religious authorities who are seeking to kill him, bravely announces, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” He surely doesn’t sound like “Doubting Thomas” in that episode.

Nor does he in the legend that he was the apostle who evangelized India. Today’s Indian Christian Church still traces its birth to Thomas. Again, not the actions of a “doubting” disciple.

Plus, in our passage, wasn’t Thomas only asking for the same proof the other disciples had already received? And when he does see the resurrected Christ, he utters the supreme Christological statement in the fourth gospel: “My Lord and my God!”

So, what is Thomas? Brave? Doubting? Or maybe a combination of each, sometimes heroic, sometimes scared and unsure. Likely he was both, depending on the circumstances and his personal involvement in them. He harbored both courage and reticence, faith and fear. Otherwise, he was exactly like every one of us.

And I believe that is the true lesson and power of the story. We are drawn to Thomas because a part of him resides in each one of us. His questions are our questions. We, too, doubt. We are unsure, skeptical, yet we also want to believe.

And the story reminds us that there is nothing wrong with doubt. As the poet Tennyson wrote: “There lives more faith in honest doubt,

Believe me than in half the creed.”

Doubt is not wrong or bad. It does not soil or mar the seeker. Yet, as Tennyson noted, this is “honest doubt.” Honest doubt seeks truth, belief, understanding. For some, doubt becomes an excuse, a cover for a lack of commitment, a smoke screen for not wanting to give my money, or desiring to play golf on Sunday morning, or do what I want instead of what God wants.

Doubt that seeks belief wants to know. Like Thomas, it strives to be present where God might appear.

An arrogant astronomer approached a minister at a party. “Pastor,” the astronomer smugly asked, “wouldn’t you agree that all of Christian theology could be summed up in this simple song, ‘Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so’?”

“Yes,” the pastor replied. “If you would agree that all of astronomy can be summed up in this song, ‘Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are?’”

There is nothing wrong with doubt if it seeks understanding and commitment.

“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

This is a story of promise and hope. Often this episode is read as a swipe taken at “doubting” Thomas. But the gospel writer does not relate it for those present that day, but for all of us who were not.

The narrative promises us that Christ has not abandoned us. It is an affirmation to those of us who have come after the Easter appearances that Christ will be just as present for us. Later generations will also experience the risen Christ.

At the heart of this story is Jesus’ generous offering of himself. In the scripture, Christ returns to visit the disciples again and again. Repeatedly, to these scared, confused followers Jesus offers the gift of his presence and his peace.

When we read the accounts of Jesus’ post resurrection appearances, we are confronted with uncertain followers in hiding. They know about the resurrection, yet they continue to live fearfully, meeting behind closed doors. Otherwise, the Easter message struggles against their realistic view of the world. They have seen the risen Christ, and they are still afraid.

Well, we surely understand that. The Easter message of hope and peace, of victory over sin and death, struggles to conquer the realism of lives filled with disease, unemployment, marital struggles, the trauma of everyday living. Like the disciples, we also want to hide behind closed doors. Yet, this passage notes that Jesus comes again and again to the disciples, repeatedly offering his presence and his peace.

And, he continues to come to us.

Every Sunday in this sanctuary a proclamation of hope,
in youth groups and Stephen Ministers,
Bible study and Sunday School,
the Gittings ministry and “It’s Elementary!”

Every solo sung, every scripture passage read, every circle lesson taught proclaims and carries the presence of Jesus, the power of his love and forgiveness.

We struggle, we stumble, we fall, we hide our eyes, but as this passage teaches us, Jesus keeps coming back, again and again and again.

In the April Budget Travel magazine, Denise McIvor of Boothwyn, Pennsylvania tells about a friend of hers who while vacationing in Florida would sneak onto a private golf course early in the morning to jog. Since his glasses always fogged up, he didn't wear them. He was careful to keep off the greens and to jump over the landscaping logs that were all around the course. But one day he saw a groundskeeper headed toward him and figured he was busted. Instead, the man stretched out his hand and said, "I just want to shake your hand. I ain't never seen anybody jump over gators like that!" Those landscaping logs were actually alligators catching some early morning sun.

There are God inspired elements of life we calmly jump over without our spiritual glasses — financial resources, supportive spouses, the power of forgiveness, the hope of eternity for our loves ones — without looking closely enough to realize how important they are to alleviating our doubt.

“Where In the World Is Jesus?”

Sometimes our faith feels like it is playing that old game, “Where In the World Is Waldo?”, where you had to find that funny looking guy named Waldo on a page full of distractions. Likewise, so many other elements of living stuff our senses and cover our eyes from seeing the resurrected Christ. The divine is often lost on a page of bills, sickness, running noses, and demanding bosses.

But as for Thomas, so for us, Christ continues to reveal himself, offering the proof of his love and forgiveness, his presence. We find it in our blessings. We experience it in our community of faith. We see it in one another.

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” The promise remains. “Where in the world is Jesus?” Right here.

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