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**Getting Past the Unknown – John 20:19-31**

We've misjudged Thomas. Really. It simply isn't fair to label him "Doubting Thomas:" This passage isn't about ordinary doubt or lack of belief.

Thomas isn't grappling with doubt: he's drowning in grief. And the first stage of grief is denial. For Thomas, it's taken the form of denying that Jesus could possibly still be alive. In his heart, he's hurting so badly, that he can't bear the thought of losing Jesus again.

Thomas was, we're told, called Didymus, The Twin. But Scripture doesn't tell us right out whose twin he was. So, consider this: it's just possible that he was *called* The Twin because he was so extraordinarily devoted to Jesus – in other words, he tried so hard to mirror Jesus that he got "The Twin" as his nickname.

Think about that. Thomas is the one who, earlier in John's Gospel (ch 11), when the other disciples realize that no one can convince Jesus to stay away from Jerusalem, where the authorities want to – at the very least – arrest him, Thomas announces, "Let's all go too, so that we can die with Jesus." Thomas is also the one who asks, when Jesus, in his

last great lecture to the disciples, tells them “I am going on ahead to prepare a place for you, so that where I am you may be also, and my way there is known to you,” Thomas is the one disciple who puts words on what they are probably all thinking: “Lord, we don’t *know* where you’re going, so how can we know the way?”

Thomas can’t bear to be separated from his beloved Teacher! He can’t bear losing sight of him, even if it’s while Jesus scouts out the path for the rest of them to follow!

And now, here he is once more. He’s missed Jesus showing up in a locked room after the resurrection – and simply doesn’t believe the others, even though he has trusted them in the past and is very much a part of the inner circle, a symptom of grief. He’s got to see Jesus himself – he pushes away the others’ stories. They just hurt too much.

You love someone deeply, you cannot help but grieve being separated from them. And sometimes grief seems strange to those looking at it from outside, outside your own heart; sometimes you don’t want to hear comforting words, because they simply can’t be borne.

There was a lady who lived near my childhood home – seemed ancient to me, but I really don’t know how old she was – who, it was said, and I once saw, continued to set a place for her son who had died years before, at every meal. Otherwise, she was just the same as you and I. She just had to set a place, even though she knew he would never

be there. She was in the *denial* of grief, and denial *of* grief. She “knew better” – but still couldn’t accept what she “knew.”

Thomas – let’s just say go ahead and say that he was called The Twin because of his love for the Lord. Thomas was one of the Twelve, Jesus’ inner circle, but apparently not one of the inner-inner circle that was Peter, James, and John. John is called in places “the beloved disciple” or “the disciple Jesus loved,” but that doesn’t mean that Jesus cared about him less; as we say, “Jesus loves us as if there were only one of us.” It’s just that Thomas’ admiration of Jesus led him to try and be just like Jesus in such an obvious way that he was called, half-jokingly, Jesus’ twin. There’s evidence to support this in some early church sources, but it seems to have gotten lost in simpler desire to use Thomas as a foil, someone so sure of himself and his own senses, someone who has to prove that the resurrected Jesus is really real – so, “Doubting Thomas.” But look at again with the eyes of devotion.

Jesus, before his death, says to those who follow him that they are no longer his disciples, but his friends. In fact, Jesus cannot stop talking about love, about God’s love, about his love for them, for everyone – “live in my love,” he tells them, and us.

Those around Jesus were so bound to him that at first *no one* would believe he could rise from the dead without some sort of proof. And then that proof began to emerge: first among the women at the

tomb, because angels told them; Peter and John, because they saw the empty tomb and the grave cloths; then the rest because they actually saw Jesus, after they'd doubted Peter and John, and were hiding together in a room – all, that is, except Thomas, off alone with his grief.

It's hard to believe what you haven't seen. Ever looked out on a dark night and wondered if your car was still in the driveway? Or ever reached out to touch something that you think can't be real? For centuries, people didn't know there was such a thing as "air!"

So Thomas doesn't "doubt," at least not the way we use the word. Thomas is just unable to overcome the loss he felt when he saw Jesus, his beloved Teacher, die right in front of him. Grief, loss, tragedy, trauma – all those things can make your brain play tricks on you.

I've heard my dog – dead for six years – bark; I've thought I've heard my father's voice, gone for nearly ten years now. They're gone, but not forgotten; and sometimes the heart and brain conspire to remind us of what is no longer.

But sometimes it works the other way around, like for Thomas, whose Teacher's words before his death just couldn't overcome Thomas' eyewitness belief in his loss, words even from his beloved Jesus that couldn't erase the experience of watching Jesus die.

Thomas doesn't have to touch Jesus, in the end; all it takes is seeing him to break through his grief and give him the comfort of the truth – Jesus lives! He has risen!

And for us? Well, to begin with, we are those who Jesus says are blessed with belief without having to see: we see our friend through the eyes of faith and faith alone. This story helps us to comprehend that Jesus wasn't just some sort of ghost. And it also helps us through those inevitable times when it is just so hard to believe. It's OK to wonder about the resurrection sometimes, to struggle with faith.

And we, too, have grief issues – whether you've lost a friend or a spouse or just trust that the world will be kind to us. As more and more women and men return to this crazy world of ours from the danger and loss of combat, they will be struck by the contradictions that Thomas and we feel. And it will do strange things to many of them, just as loss does strange things to many of us when we deal with senseless tragedies.

But Jesus did not leave the disciples alone; he left them the Holy Spirit, the comforter – and he left them each other. We still have each other, we can be there for one another.

One final point: Thomas was the only one not there in the room when Jesus made his first appearance to the disciples; he was out, and it took another week for him to receive the comfort his friends had already found.

First, grief takes time. And second, don't go it alone. If you're looking for Jesus, you'll find him in another person. If you can't bring yourself to believe, let your heart find him for you.

Jesus' response to Thomas' question, "How can we know where you're going, if we don't know the way?" is for us, too; and it could not be plainer: Jesus answers Thomas, "I am the way, I am the truth, and I am life."