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Rev. Dr. Thomas Evans

John 20:1-18

Thorny Theological Questions: What Does It Mean To Have Faith In Jesus? What Difference Does It Make In Our Lives?



Jesus' dear friend, Mary Magdalene, comes to His tomb. Though she sees that His body is gone she still cannot conceive that He has risen. Over the past few years, she followed Him in life been drawn to His truth, love, and acceptance. So, she weeps outside in grief over His death, compounded now by the additional loss of His body. But she was drawn to this place. She clearly has faith in Him. Faith enough to be one of the few to follow Him all the way to the cross. Faith enough to be the first to come to His tomb. Faith enough that when she discovers He is alive she runs to proclaim, "I have seen the Lord!"

Mary's simple, powerful actions have much to teach us about what it means to have faith in Jesus. We will see how having faith in Jesus' life, faith in Jesus' death, and faith in Jesus' resurrection can forge a trust in God that can meet every challenge you will face.

The first part of faith in Jesus is faith in His life; they way that He lived on earth.

I believe the weather person when they tell us it is going to rain so I bring an umbrella, but I don't know them. It is more a nebulous and abstract trust that they are doing their job, whoever is on the television. I don't know their character, their voice, their inner being, their soul.

In this way faith in Jesus is different than simple belief. You can believe Jesus was born, did miracles, and is the Son of God; you can believe all of that and still not have "faith *in Him*". The Bible tells us even the devils believe...and tremble. Mere belief is no feat of devotion. Mere belief won't make much of a difference in your life. But faith in Him. Now that's different.

Mary Magdalene's faith was not an abstract set of beliefs that informed her life, instead it was a life-altering encounter with Jesus himself. For the way that Jesus lived encapsulated the hope for a world made new. She saw how He had compassion for sinners, not judgement. Mark's gospel tells us it practically tore at His guts to see the people hungry, sick, and afraid. Rather than shunning these sinners, He went into their homes and broke bread with them.

She heard His teachings that blessed the poor and empowered the meek. In a world in which might makes right, Jesus taught those with great power had an even greater call to servanthood. He showed people that God gave the law not to subjugate and control but to show them how to love. And He showed no partiality. He would heal the child of wealthy and powerful man but first he would heal a shunned woman and restore her to community.

Faith in Jesus' life means striving to live in such a way that your life reflects the essence of His life. Perhaps you know people like this. For me it is my mother's friend, Sister Mary Louise. I first met her when she was cheering madly for Patrick Ewing and Georgetown basketball in the 1980s. My mother and Mary Louise were in the same Bioethics Ph.D. program. God had called Mary Louise in her late teens to become a nun in the Sisters of St. Joseph, but she sought more education so that she could have a greater impact.

After her degree, she founded a health care for the homeless in Washington D.C. She gathered dozens of doctors and nurses to give them quality care and life. Later she founded a Tenant Empowerment Program. It served women with AIDS who were addicted to drugs and had children to care for. They received medical care, recovery programs and then housing. As the women became employed, they started paying for the housing and gained ownership. She has always lived in neighborhoods filled with addiction and other challenges and gives her money earned back to the order, even as she seeks to care for her sister. A powerful witness.

We cannot all be Sister Mary Louises, but we should all be able to point to that part of our life in which we give of ourselves to make the life of the outcast and the forgotten know that God loves them.

But faith in Jesus is not only faith in His life but faith in His death. Believing in Jesus' death, in how He died, multiplies the difference faith makes.

As Mary Magdalene wept by the tomb, perhaps she was replaying His frightful death in her mind, trying to find meaning. Mary was one of the few who had courage to stay by her friend to the end. When people mocked Him, taunted Him saying, "Why don't you save yourself?" surely, she wondered the same thing. For she knew of His power to walk on water and calm a stormy sea. She knew His power even to raise the dead.

At Jesus last breath, perhaps she heard the Roman guard, in seeing the way Jesus died proclaim, "Truly this man was God's Son."

In that moment, in seeing Jesus, that guard believed he was seeing God. His whole life when people met Jesus, they knew they were encountering someone unique.

Yes, He showed us the way to be human but the disciples and the crowd sensed something more. People bowed at His feet, demons spoke His name and shattered. Those healed wanted to follow Him to the ends of the earth. But it was not until the manner of His death that His true nature was revealed.

To believe in His death makes a profound difference in how we conceive the very nature of God. The glory and splendor of God is not found in power to forge planets and ignite stars, it is not found in His eternity or immensity, it is not found in His omniscience or omnipotence it is found in this one act.

Jesus' death showed us the very heart of God's infinite love, love beyond reason or expectation.

I imagine Mary might have understood this, for perhaps she heard Him pray while He

died, "Father forgive them." It was in His ability to forgive His enemies, to pray for their salvation, that we see the type of God we have.

This faith in Jesus' death makes a deep difference in suffering. I knew a couple that when their son was diagnosed with epilepsy were nearly destroyed. The endless tests, misdiagnosis, and the fear their son endured was nearly crushing them. But even so there was one place they found comfort.

They felt they could pray to God for solace since God knew what it was like to see a son suffer. And in their prayers, they found not only comfort but a measure of strength to help them through.

But there is something more to come... the resurrection.

Had the final word of the story been death, Mary's devotion would be sweet, but a mere consolation prize. For it would mean that there are forces greater than love. It would mean that evil could win. Her faith would be noble but end in tears, in loss, in resignation and defeat.

Perhaps, like Mary, you may be weeping in grief but remember the Lord is near. Hope and redemption is sitting right beside us. There is a time for weeping. But on this day, it is a time for rejoicing.

For faith in Jesus' resurrection means faith in a God who redeems all creation.

And so when Mary finally recognizes Jesus she clings to Him and then races to proclaim, "I have seen the Lord!" And later,

Thomas, when shown proof, declares, "My Lord and my God!"

In Jesus' resurrection we discover that God's love and forgiveness have power to triumph over all evil, sin and decay. You may forgive someone for breaking an irreplaceable vase, but the vase is still broken. The resurrection redeems the final consequences of human evil by undoing it. The broken vase of humanity is put back together by God.

The resurrection is the ultimate triumph of God of the eternal, unshakeable, unconditional, unstoppable, irresistible unchangeable love of God.

As South African Bishop Desmond Tutu declared, "Goodness is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hate, victory is ours through Christ who loved us!"

Faith in Jesus' life means trust in His teachings and seeking to live His example of respect of love for all especially the downtrodden. Faith in Jesus' death means trusting in love beyond reason and forgiveness always. Faith in Jesus' resurrection means whatever tragedies, sorrows, or challenges we face victory will be ours through Him who loves us.

Today we celebrate that God's love cannot be defeated, so we jubilantly declare, with love enough for all, with one loud voice, "Jesus Christ is risen today! Alleluia! And Amen!"