

Broken Beginnings and Kingdom Conclusions: Disciples

Matthew 4:18-22, 28:16-20, Luke 24:36-48, John 20:24-29

For all of us, there comes a time in our lives where we question everything we know about ourselves, about our beliefs, even about the world around us.

We take a long look at our lives, and we wonder “Is this really who I am? Is this really what God called me to?” Sometimes we even find ourselves wondering if there is a God after all, or if He cares like we talk about so often.

Through no fault of our own, we struggle with this, whether it’s due to depression, or we’ve just lost our jobs, or perhaps your marriage is going through a rough patch, and you wonder “what did I get myself into?”

We carry these questions along and we fight, and struggle against it, and sometimes through some breakthrough akin to a miracle, we finally have our heads above water, where we are no longer drowning under the weight of all these doubts.

Other times, it’s as though someone has strapped cinder blocks to our feet and told us to swim, but all we can do is shuffle a few inches along the ocean floor. We come to church, and put on the mask that says, “oh yeah, everything is wonderful, I couldn’t be happier!” all the while we feel like our lives are falling apart, and we have nothing left so we yell at God and blame Him for everything wrong, and we ask Him “why me?”

Sometimes, I find myself wondering about these “heroes of the faith” that we find ourselves talking about so much. Did they doubt God? Well, less so “did they doubt Him?” and more so “how often did they doubt?” and “what freed them from their doubt?”

Take Esther, who Amanda spoke about last week, for example. When Mordecai told Esther of the plot against the Jews, and when she agreed to approach the king, she must have had her doubts, right? She prayed and fasted for 3 days, that’s a lot of time for doubt. When Mordecai told her “And who knows but that you have been brought to your royal position for such a

time as this?" there had to have been some voice of doubt telling her "No, there's no way that's true".

Even so, she had proof that God was with her already. God was the one who brought her into royalty after all. Even before her time as royalty, God was with her. It didn't matter that she seemed like basically a nobody, God still was with her.

We often remember the disciples of Jesus being completely faithful followers, with no doubts whatsoever, heeding every word He ever said, following Him to the letter. Furthermore, we like to think of them as wise old men (or at the very least, middle-aged), but we never really remember where they came from, now do we?

These guys, at the oldest, were 20-something nobody's. They were fishermen and tax-collectors (the latter being completely reviled by Jewish people since most were corrupt). For the most part, they simply were carrying on the family business after their education.

The men we read about in our passage in Matthew 4 were fishermen, working tireless, monotonous, but necessary jobs. If they weren't in the process of catching fish, they were repairing their nets. If they weren't repairing their nets, they were catching fish.

Here we find Simon Peter and Andrew, two brothers, working away, casting their nets into the Sea of Galilee, when who should see them but Jesus. He calls to them and says "Come, follow me".

Now this is kind of a huge deal, but perhaps not for any reason we might recognize at first. I mean, yes, it's Jesus the Son of God calling them, but let's put ourselves in their shoes for a minute.

Every young Jewish boy wanted to learn whatever they could about the faith from their local rabbi. Rabbis would often be found with potential students approaching them, all asking to be taken under their wing.

If you found yourself being taught by a rabbi, especially a well-renowned or knowledgeable one, you would spend every waking moment with them, trying to learn everything you could from them, including their way of life, because if you could imitate them as they lived, then you'd be like Moses, imitating God.

The rabbi would invite you into his group of students, he'd keep you under his tutelage, until you became of age, at which point you'd go off with all you've learned from them, and lived your life as a fisherman, or a carpenter, or whatever your father was doing.

However, if the rabbi you were studying under found you to be an exceptional student, he'd tell you "come, follow me", and invite you to spend the next number of years becoming accustomed to his lifestyle, preparing the way for you to become a rabbi yourself, under the same school of teaching and thought that was likely passed down to him by his rabbi, including his own insights into the Jewish faith and life. You would then carry on these traditions, adding your own

revelations and insights into your teachings, passing them along to your own students, on and on and on.

Simon Peter and Andrew, and James and John, didn't make the cut. They tried learning from different teachers, but when the time came for their rabbis to choose someone to follow in their footsteps, someone else was chosen.

Imagine the doubt that they carried after that. "Well I'm never going to be called on, so I guess I'm going to have to fall back on my father's business." For some of us it's a little easier to imagine that feeling, that we aren't good enough, that we just can't make it, and so we resign ourselves to a monotonous routine that strips us of our joy and identity as Children of God. But I promise you, that's not the end of it.

Now, what these men may have considered their "failure" didn't completely stop them, they were part of the crowds that learned from John the Baptist, which means they knew about the baptism of Jesus, they weren't completely unfamiliar with who He was.

Contrary to popular belief, Jesus very likely was *not* a carpenter. In everything we read about Him throughout the New Testament, He carries with Him the characteristics of a rabbi, the largest piece of evidence being the people would constantly approach Him calling Him “good teacher”, or other similar names.

Now Jesus, who was likely somewhat known as a rabbi at this point, is walking along the Sea of Galilee where He encounters Simon Peter and Andrew, and then James and John, where they are called to follow Jesus, to take up His way of life.

JESUS. Walking over to a couple of reject fishermen, telling them that they had been chosen to learn from Him, to learn about God from the very Son of God.

They spent the next 3 years of their lives, following the God-Man Jesus, learning from Him, living like Him, laughing with Him, witnessing and taking part in miracle after miracle. But that wouldn't have happened had they not stepped out in faith and trusted Him.

When we struggle with doubting who we are as Children of God, there comes a point when we need to set that aside for our own good, releasing that to the One who already carried all of those doubts and fears to the cross.

It's not exactly easy to do that. Maybe you feel like you've failed in some monumental way, or let God down. For so many of us, we've been following Christ for years, if not decades, but we are afraid of fully giving into God because we doubt that He will take us – broken, shattered, and failing in and of ourselves – and make something new and beautiful out of us.

I urge you, remember who Christ is, and what He came to earth to do. He came to show us a new life, and through His death and resurrection, bring us into that new life, where He makes all things new, where He puts a little gold into your story, and makes you more beautiful in His eyes than you ever could have been on your own.

But what happens when we lose sight of who Christ is as a whole? What happens when we doubt what He's done? What happens when we doubt the very nature of God and His promises?

You aren't a worse person for that. You aren't "less of a Christian". Even Jesus' disciples went through doubt like that, even after Jesus had told them that He would rise from the dead.

I could certainly imagine why though. Put yourself in that situation: your mentor, teacher, friend, who you've been following for the last 3 years, was just taken from you, put through an unfair trial, and brutally murdered between two thieves.

The man they spend years with, learning from, laughing with, was now dead! Buried in a tomb behind a giant rock! They were heartbroken, distraught, because they thought they would never see Him again.

My first real experience with death happened back in 2011. My grandfather had been in the hospital after a series of heart attacks and strokes and was quickly and steadily declining. I knew he wouldn't be around for long, but I didn't really comprehend what that meant.

On November 11, 2011, about 3:00 in the afternoon, we got the call from the hospital. At around 1:00 in the morning, he passed away. I remember hanging up the phone and laughing because somehow, I just couldn't make sense of it.

After his funeral the following week, we piled into the car, and that's when it finally hit me: he was gone. I broke down and started sobbing uncontrollably.

A few months passed, and while I had made some sense of what had happened, I was still shaken. Then, 7 months after my dad's dad passed, my mom's dad was found in his backyard, having suffered a massive stroke. He was healthy, and then suddenly gone.

Death shakes you. It makes you question God's plan and His sovereignty. You begin to lose sight of that hope. You doubt. A girl I went to high school with was in an accident this past week, and passed away. We were never close, but she had dated one of my friends, so I knew her from a distance. I ask that you keep this girl's family in your prayers this week as they prepare for the funeral. Death creates a heaviness that obscures your sight from God. Pray that God would not let them lose sight of Him, that their pain would not keep them from God, who will heal them of it. Pray that Jesus would give them proof of His presence, as He once gave proof to the disciples of His Lordship.

When I think of the loss that the disciples experienced after Christ's crucifixion, I can understand why those disciples on the road to Emmaus didn't recognize Him at first. I mean, there's no way He could have been there, right?

But then He breaks bread, and gives it to them, and they're reminded of who He is, and the fact that He is Lord over all. Of

course, who wouldn't rush off and tell the world who He is and what He's done after that?

These disciples, who were part of the crowds that followed Jesus during His ministry before the crucifixion, immediately ran off to find the eleven, His closest students, and told them what happened. Of course, they're going to be shocked and confused, it doesn't make sense to them. And then Jesus showed up. The doors were shut and locked, no one was getting in or out without being noticed, and then suddenly Jesus is there with them. Kind of makes sense now, as to why they thought they were seeing a ghost, huh?

But would a ghost still carry the wounds of crucifixion? Would a ghost eat? So Jesus shows them this. He reminds them that He is Lord over everything. Jesus reminds them that scripture had always said that this would happen, and they are overjoyed, relieved, freed from their doubts, their teacher, mentor, and closest friend was back! And then Jesus reminds them of His call on them, the reason they followed Him for 3 years. In this reminder, in this call, their sight is clear again,

and they can bear witness to His power, love, and authority over all again, perhaps being stronger in their faith than ever before.

I promise you, Christ is still with you. He hasn't left you alone. He has sent the Holy Spirit to be with you, to work in you, and through you, to reveal the truth of God, even through your brokenness. Even though you've experienced incredible loss, even though you've lost your job, even though you've been battling mental illness your whole life, Christ has not left you alone! God promises that He will never leave you nor forsake you, so hold onto that promise! Through whatever storm you're facing, God is with you!

But what happens when we're so shaken that we can't help but continue to doubt? What do we do when nothing is going to change our minds but God proving Himself to us?

How many of you have heard the of phrase "Doubting Thomas"? Like, "Oh, don't be such a Doubting Thomas"? This expression comes out of John 20 where we find out that

Thomas wasn't with the other disciples when Jesus appeared to them and ate with them.

The other disciples, of course, find him and tell him immediately, but Thomas doesn't believe them. He tells them, "Unless I see the nail marks in His hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe".

He wants proof. He wants to have the full experience of Jesus' resurrection. He is so lost, so shaken, that he needs Jesus to prove Himself to Thomas.

I want to remind you here: Thomas wasn't the only one who doubted – the rest of the disciples did too. Jesus proved Himself to them already, appearing to them, showing them the wounds that He suffered.

Then, Jesus repeats the proof that He gave the rest of the disciples to Thomas, but not only can Thomas see the wounds, Jesus invites him to touch them, to receive real, physical,

tangible evidence of His resurrection. Thomas then exclaims “My Lord and my God”! He’s not surprised, but rather is saying “I’m not going to doubt you anymore; I believe you”.

I have a bit of a soft spot for Thomas here, since I have a doubt story of my own. A number of years ago, I was in a really unhealthy on-again-off-again relationship. Without going into detail, the time came eventually for me to get out for good. A friend of mine pulled me aside and said, “look, you need to end it”. Long story short, I did. I was so fed up with the situation I was in and didn’t realize it until I was out of it.

It was so awful that I told God I was done with dating, and unless He changed my mind, unless He showed me exactly who it was that I was going to marry, I was done.

Apparently, God had something in mind, because in that moment, a scene flashed before my eyes. It was raining, and the most beautiful woman I had ever seen was walking in front of me, leading me through a wooded path, and smiling

back at me. It may have been raining, but it felt like God was shining the sun down on her and nothing else mattered.

And in that same moment, it was gone. “Yeah, I definitely imagined that”, I thought to myself. “There’s no way I actually saw that”. I asked God for some proof, to say that it was actually Him that showed me that, and without hesitation, I saw us together, on a plane, headed overseas (something that had been on my mind for some time). I *still* couldn’t believe it. So I tucked it away in the back of my mind and tried to move on with my life.

The following September, it was freshmen move-in day at Ambrose, and I was hanging out on the quad, laying the grass, catching up with a friend of mine. Another of my friends called over to someone on the rocks, saying “hey, do you want to join us for some frisbee?” And even though I only heard this girl’s response, it’s like someone was yelling at me “LOOK UP, IT’S HER”! And of course, I tried to ignore it, and instead laid there frozen, staring at the sky.

That year, I was helping out with the annual youth conference at Ambrose, and I was supposed to meet with one of the organizers and a volunteer. I walk into the meeting and who's sitting there? It was *her*. She was *real*. I, of course, was freaking out internally.

Time went on, and I decided I was going to ask God for more proof. There's a coffee shop by Ambrose that everyone went to, and so I told God, "I'm going to head there at 3:00. If she's there, then I'll know it's in fact You that told me about her". I went there at 3, ordered my coffee, and didn't see her anywhere. Once my coffee was ready, I went to the counter to get it, and I looked up and who did I see? It was *her*. I tried to ignore it, write it off as coincidence, I mean it easily could have been, right?

Over the next two years, I asked God for proof after proof, again and again, always too afraid to let myself believe Him. Fast-forward to the late spring of 2017, and we're sitting outside in the middle of the night, staring at the stars. We had spent 2 years getting to know each other, and I had really

fallen for her, but I still was too afraid to say anything about it. Little did I know, she felt the same way. And little did I know, but she was about to ask God for a sign. She said "God, if this is going to happen, I need a sign from you. Light up the night sky".

Of course, God delivered. The entire inky black night sky flashed white, for just a moment. "That's weird", I thought. This time, she was the one freaking out. God gave us both endless, huge amounts of proof, but then as if to tie it all off, God seemed to have one thing left in store.

Thursday, June 8, a few days after we decided that we were in fact dating, we decided to head out of town for a walk at Big Hill Springs. When we got there, it was pouring. Even so, we pressed on. A little while into the trail, the most beautiful woman I had ever seen was walking in front of me, leading me through a wooded path, and smiling back at me. It may have been raining, but I'll tell you, it felt like God was shining the sun down on her and nothing else mattered.

I think we know how the story goes after that. But leading up to then, there was years of doubt, questioning whether or not it was, in fact, God telling me this. Even through it all, God proved himself faithful time and time again, all I had to do was ask. Even though I doubted for so long, I asked God for proof, and He delivered.

This is where I really understand where Thomas is coming from. He wants verification. He wants proof. See, we may spend so much of our lives doubting God, but He promises to deliver. In Matthew 7:7 Jesus said, “ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you”.

When we find ourselves doubting, we know we can ask God to prove Himself, and He will be good for it, He'll make His presence known. If you are in a place of doubt right now, I implore you, be a Doubting Thomas! Ask for proof! God will answer!

We may fall short on our own, we may not measure up, we may doubt our place in God's plan, but God is seeking you, He wants you.

Matthew 28:16-20 tells us that even though the disciples doubted, Jesus sent them out to make disciples of all nations: to be living proof of God taking them from their Broken Beginnings to a Kingdom Conclusion.

Even though we don't measure up, God is still calling us into His Kingdom, for His Kingdom purpose. Just because you are in a place of doubt now, doesn't mean that there's no place for you in His Kingdom. God can and will take you from your brokenness, and your doubt, and give you the proof you need.

I'll leave you with this: whatever place you're in at the moment, bring it to Jesus. He'll take you from your Broken Beginning, towards His Kingdom Conclusion.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, You are holy, wonderful, almighty, and faithful. We thank you for all that You are, that You see us in our brokenness, and still You call us. We ask that whatever place of life that we're in, You remind us of Your power, Your presence, and Your sovereignty over all. We are not perfect, and we don't always remember or recognize what You're doing, and we doubt that You're at work in us or the world around us, and for that we ask for Your forgiveness. We thank you for sending Your Son Jesus, that we can be forgiven, and redeemed. We ask that You continue to work in us and through us by Your Spirit.

In Jesus' mighty name, amen.