

“Over and Doubt” or “Over and Out?”

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The gospels are very disproportionate. Matthew, for example, is 28 chapters long and 27 of them lead up to the resurrection. The resurrection is recorded in the first ten verses of the last chapter 28 and then there are only ten verses more. That's it! In Mark there are 668 verses and the resurrection happens at verse 665! Only three verses (or twelve with the longer ending)! In Luke there are 24 chapters and the resurrection is recorded in the first part of chapter 24 and the gospel is over a half a chapter later. In John there are 21 chapters. He spends chapters 12 through 19 on Jesus' final week, chapter 20 on the resurrection, and then there's only one more. That's it!

You see a sailboat and most of it is hull, cabin, and sails. The rudder is a small part at the end. But the end part, a sailor will tell you, is very significant and I want to take us to these gospel conclusions for the next several weeks, to the post-resurrection material.

Let us pray.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then these words: Matthew 28:9-20. *Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. [10] Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."*

[11] While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. [12] When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the

soldiers a large sum of money, [13] telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' [14] If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." [15] So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.

[16] Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. [17] When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. [18] Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. [19] Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [20] and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." The word became flesh and dwelt amongst us, full of grace and truth, and from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace.

It's back and forth, up and down, from this pole to that pole ... this Matthew or resurrection ending. Women telling friends the *good* news. Guards telling superiors the *bad* news. Up, down. There's *mission* – Go and show. There's *countermission* – Go and cover-up. Go and tell versus go and hush. There are disciples that *worship* and others that *doubt*.

When I was a kid and we played baseball, we would determine who was at bat first by grabbing the baseball bat and moving our hands up to the end of the handle. Whoever had the last grip over the bat's very end, got to choose. Just so it happens here: mission, countermission, the great and final commission. The great commission grabs it in the end.

But there's this little oddity, that's part of the back and forth, pole to pole, that doesn't make it look quite final or complete or victorious. It's there in a little five-letter word: doubt. Everything looks strong for the resurrection and the Great Commission and then there's... ahh...doubt. The disciples responded to the risen Jesus with worship, but others doubted. It being there seems to corrupt the ending.

Doubt is in life and it's in the Bible. How do *you* experience doubt? We doubt that your team will go all the way to the pennant this year, that we could learn a foreign language even if our life depended on it, that we did our taxes correctly, that we married the right person, that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. We experience it here and there, don't we?

You know what I think? If you're closing out your gospel with only ten verses, why bring up doubt at all? Maybe just airbrush over it. Wouldn't that have packaged up the Gospel of Matthew more nicely?

No. I think there are four reasons why God lets doubt be a part of Matthew's closing picture and to each one I'll give a word. Maybe together they will help us with our doubts. Shakespeare said, "Our doubts are traitors, and make us lose the good we oft might win." Maybe these four words will help us win and gain the good.

The first word is **accepts**. When I was in college I took a class where the professor seemed to delight in saying that there were lots of religions with lots of myths about men dying and rising. One day it all grabbed me and I cringed with, "Is any of my faith true?"

Later that night as I read the Bible, the words of Peter came off the page and I had a spiritual experience as his words spoke to my soul, "Lord, to whom else shall we go? You alone have the words of eternal life." It was as

if the invisible God assured my heart and I was full of gratitude.

I've since learned that that professor wasn't very correct in his assessment, that the other stories of dying and rising are like fairy stories representing the winter and spring cycles and that Jesus teaching about his death, being deliberate about it, then rising again and all this understood as factual is quite unique.

But did you notice how I was full of doubt in the afternoon and full of devotion in the evening? Our lives are like that. I'm trusting. Now I'm not trusting. Trusting, not trusting. As long as we are free, as long as we are finite, as long as we have limited knowledge, as long as we do not know the future, as long as we are sinners, as long as we understand that certainty makes faith unnecessary, we will have doubt and this passage seems to tell us, don't expect all your life, all your self, all your church, and all your friends to be without any doubt.

You'll be too hard on yourself and too hard on others. God lets doubt be in this closing picture to help us accept it as a part of this reality. Now I am not saying to nurse doubt as many do, but I am saying not to fear it but to accept its existence. God doesn't censor it and neither should we. After all, there it is in the rudder portion of Matthew.

The second word is **argues**. Just because we accept its presence doesn't mean we let it be or let it grow. The very mention of doubt is meant to have us argue with it. No shoulder shrugging helplessness toward doubt here. No simply allowing doubts to exist without any challenge.

I remember one of my boys dating a gal and at one point he had the thought that she was wondering if he was the right guy for her. He could've shuffled his feet in the dirt and mumbled, "Oh well and que sera sera." But no, sir'ee. He puffed out his chest and bought flowers and

told her that that doubt wasn't true and that he was great in these departments ... all to argue with any doubts she might have been having.

That can happen with us. Look how it happens in the text. Hey Guards, you say that while you were asleep the disciples came and stole the body away? If you were asleep, how do you know that that's what happened? Hey Readers, just in case you thought we were full of an ignorant just-wanting-to-believe, look at how clueless we were, how we all weren't ready to believe. Hey Audience, if something unprecedented happens, wouldn't you rub your eyes and wonder if what you were seeing was true? Doesn't our doing so argue for what we're saying as being true? Hey People, haven't you ever said, "This is too good to be true?" God, follow this, let doubt be present to help strengthen us by arguing against doubt.¹

When I was a pastor in San Antonio, I did a lot of work with young adults. Men and women in their twenties tend to fall in love and in some cases the dating would go on and on and on, for years! I would eventually ask, "Aren't you going to have the 'Where is this relationship going?' talk?" And occasionally I would get an answer, "We just have some doubts..." "About what?" "We're not sure." "Listen," I would say, "Definition half the time is resolution. Figure specifically what you're having doubts about and you'll be surprised at how much that helps. And then figure out how to get the answers to what you still have questions about. But if you don't do these two things, you'll be in this convenient and painful quagmire forever – never having to make a

¹ I imagine this to be like the body gaining strength by dealing with germs and if it hadn't had that experience, if everything was pristine, then it'd be weaker. Or the way a good parent doesn't do the child's science fair project for them understanding the child's need to develop the mental power.

commitment, never getting to know the joy of commitment.”²

The third word is **action**. This passage gives us one kind of answer to the question, “What do I do with doubts I have related to God?” Accept their presence, yes. Argue with them, yes. But here’s an action that affects them.

Women were sent with the good news and a directive, “Come away into Galilee and he will meet you there.” They obeyed that, they took that step ... that *action* ... and what happened? They *saw* Jesus. Invitation, action, sight. (The same is true on the Emmaus Road in Luke ... an invitation to study the scripture, to take the Lord’s Supper, focusing on that death and resurrection ... and there is sight.)

In John 7:17 we read, “If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.” In John 14:23 we read, “Jesus replied, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.” What’s all this saying? Obey and see. Obey and be assured. In the face of your doubts act towards God and you’ll find him.

The disciples worshipped and others doubted and then there is a command to go and make disciples. Pick up your doubt and obey the next verse ... and lo, you’ll find him with you (Emmanuel) even to the end of the age. God let’s doubt be a part of the final scene so as to tell us how to answer it with trusting action.

² Dallas Willard once had a friend say he had been for many years very bothered by doubts about Jesus being the Son of God. Dallas inquired, “How much time have you spent trying to understand it?” The man answered, “Maybe ten minutes.” Bothered for years but not much thoughtful effort to resolve it.

The fourth word is **anyway**. John Wayne once said, “Courage is being scared to death - but saddling up anyway.” The disciples are at eleven and the biblical number is twelve. They’re fishermen, not priests. They’re nervous, not confident. They’re worshipping, and doubting. But Jesus doesn’t refrain from giving his command to go and make disciples of all nations. Maybe you and I are saying, “I’m not confident enough, I haven’t studied enough, I’m not sure enough.” He doesn’t reply, “I’ll wait to give it to you until you’re all together and your doubts are all over with.” Doubts didn’t deter him and doubts don’t excuse us. Jesus says, “Go and make disciples *anyway*.”

It’s now after Easter and some of us need to argue with our doubts instead of nursing them along. Some of us need to accept that doubt is going to be a part of our life until we go home to heaven. Some of us need to act against our doubt with simple obedience. Some of us need to witness for Jesus anyway.

Can a man die and live again? Can one die once for all and forgive fallen humanity? Can he bear the sins of the world such that life, not death, has the final word? Yes. That’s been answered by the story of Jesus. We have the answer. The story is over. The sacrificed has been offered. The deed is done. The question is answered. We can now debate it, ignore it, doubt it ... or get on with it. Is it a matter of over and nurse doubt or matter of over and move on out?³

³ Thomas, Doubting Thomas, didn’t stay that way. He became a confessing Thomas (“My Lord and My God”). And he became a moving Thomas. He moved on out. While Paul shared that Jesus had died and rose again for us, going all the way to Spain in the west, Thomas did the same but going all the way to India in the east. So let us be an Easter people of (last week) burning hearts and a people moving out into the world with Jesus for Jesus.

*If you would like to talk with someone about this message or your spiritual life, or to have someone pray with you, the pastors and elders of the church would welcome your call. pastorjeffwood@gmail.com www.welovefirst.org
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