

John 20:19-31 – “A Limited Imagination”¹

Fellowship question: (Use *one* of these to break the ice, to begin some discussion, and lead into the study):

When was a time you “just missed” a big event? (For example, a late flight made you miss a wedding; you went to the food vendor when the biggest play of the game happened, etc.)

What is one advertisement that you doubt could be true?

Information

Billy Collins wrote a poem about “just missing” a great event. It is titled, “The Sandhill Cranes of Nebraska.”.

Show the 2-minute video or read the poem. This is the video link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6nGJxA-F--4>

“Too bad you weren’t here six months ago, was a lament I heard on my visit to Nebraska. You could have seen the astonishing spectacle of the Sandhill cranes, thousands of them feeding and even dancing on the shores of the Platte River. There was no point in pointing out the impossibility of my being there then because I happened to be somewhere else, so I nodded and put on a look of mild disappointment if only to be part of the commiseration. It was the same look I remember wearing about six months ago in Georgia when I was told that I had just missed the spectacular annual outburst of azaleas, brilliant against the green backdrop of spring and the same in Vermont six months before that when I arrived shortly after the magnificent foliage had gloriously peaked, Mother Nature, as she is called, having touched the hills with her many-colored brush, a phenomenon that occurs, like the others, around the same time every year when I am apparently off in another state, stuck in a motel lobby with the local paper and a styrofoam cup of coffee, busily missing God knows what.”²

Sometimes, we are in the wrong place at the right time. That happened to one of the twelve disciples. We don’t know where he was or why he wasn’t where we would expect him to be, but he missed a really big event because of his absence.

Thomas was one of the Twelve disciples. Did you know that Thomas was not a proper name? It was a nickname that meant “twin.” If this man had a twin, we know nothing about him. We do

¹ This lesson is copyrighted by Dr. Rick Jordan, Great Bible Teachers, Inc, 2025. More lessons may be found at greatbibleteachers.com.

² Billy Collins, *Aimless Love: New and Selected Poems*, (New York: Random House, 2013), 173f.

know some things about Thomas and his character, however. For example, when Jesus' life was being threatened, Thomas is quoted.

- Have a class member read John 11:7-16.

How would you describe Thomas, based on this story?

We have another story in John's gospel about Thomas.

- Have a class member read John 14:1-5.

What can we surmise about Thomas from this passage?

We can only imagine what it was like to try to believe in and follow Jesus when he walked on the earth. There was no way to be sure that Jesus was who he said he was. Even John the Baptist, who had known Jesus all of his life and who baptized Jesus and pointed him out as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world," had his doubts as he sat in a prison cell. As John sits in his cell, Jesus takes the countryside by storm with his teachings and miracles, including raising a widow's only son from the dead!

- Have a class member read Luke 7:18-23.

So, those closest to Jesus were certainly stepping out in faith to associate with and follow him, but in the back of their minds, they had their doubts. This must have been especially true when they saw Jesus crucified.

- Have a class member read John 20:19-23.

If you had doubts about Jesus before, how would you feel about him now?

Here's the problem: one of the disciples was not in the room. We can only speculate why he was not present. We can only speculate if Jesus knew Thomas was missing, or if Jesus even chose this particular time, knowing that he was missing.

"Why did Thomas need to see Jesus' wounds? One of my favorite writers, Henri Nouwen, says that ministry and healing words seem in-authentic, 'unless it comes from a heart wounded by the suffering about which he speaks.' Thomas was wounded on Good Friday when he saw his friend and teacher hung up on a cross. So he didn't just need proof of Jesus, he needed healing. And he needed healing from someone who understood what it is to be wounded. I think maybe it's pretty significant that Jesus didn't return to his disciples whole and unscathed. It wasn't: 'Yeah, I conquered death, no big deal.' But: 'Man! That HURT! See these holes in my hands and feet? And check out my side!! You can put your hand in the wound, it's so big! That was a painful mess.' ... Our hope is not just in the Risen Lord, but in the Lord who is risen with wounds."³

³ <http://laurenlaughs.com/tag/doubting-thomas/>

- Have a class member read John 20:24-25.

What do you think was going on inside Thomas? Why do you think he said what he did?

- Have a class member read John 20:26-29.

Luci Shaw interprets another story with another unbelievable event – the angel telling Mary that she will give birth to the son of God:

“It came to me, recently, that faith is ‘a certain widening of the imagination.’ When Mary asked the Angel, ‘How shall these things be?’ she was asking God to widen her imagination.”⁴

How do you believe this may relate to Thomas and the other disciples?

What do you think of this idea – that doubt signifies a closed imagination, but faith is a wide imagination?

Paul offers a benediction that alludes to this idea that God can do more than we can imagine.

- Have a class member read Ephesians 3:20-21.

Why do you think it was so important to Timothy that he saw the scars of Jesus?

Transformational Exercise

Our “limited imagination” limits our faith in God. We remain “stuck” because we cannot imagine growing deeper or having a more courageous faith. But the acknowledgment that we are stuck may be the first step to receiving a new revelation.

“Most Christians consider being stuck a sign of failure or burnout, an indication that a person isn’t working hard enough on their spiritual life. Being stuck means getting an F on our spiritual report card....Nothing could be more untrue. Actually, *getting stuck is the prerequisite to getting unstuck* ...Getting stuck can be the best thing that could happen to us, because it forces us to stop. It halts the momentum of our lives. We have no choice but to notice what is around us, and we end up searching for Jesus. When we’re stuck, we’re much more likely to pay attention to our hunger for God and the longings and yearnings we have stifled. Sometimes, being stuck is the low point and we say, ‘Okay, I give up.’ We cannot grow without first giving up and letting go. Getting stuck forces us to see the futility of our situation and to put life into perspective so we can move on.”⁵

⁴ Luci Shaw, *Polishing the Petoskey Stone: New and Selected Poems* (Wheaton, Illinois: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1990), xv.

⁵ Michael Yaconelli, *Messy Spirituality: God’s Annoying Love for Imperfect People*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 92, 93.

In a moment of silence, I encourage you to offer your doubts – your “stuckness” – to God. In a silent prayer, offer your weaknesses to God. After a few moments of silent prayer, I will voice a prayer.

[Close in a prayer something like this: *My Lord and my God, our Lord and our God, we trust you. We believe. Help our unbelief. Lessen the limits of our imagination. Amen.*]